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# Theological Education

The Study of Chief Academic Officers  
in Theological Schools:  
Reflections on Academic Leadership

Volume 33  
Supplement  
Autumn 1996

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**THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION**  
**Volume 33, Supplement**  
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## Introduction

*If a president is understood as the architect of a school's direction, a dean is the builder. If a president needs to have broad vision, a dean needs to have focused inventiveness . . . . Deanships are positions of enormous, and yet nearly invisible, influence.*

Elizabeth Nordbeck, Dean  
Andover Newton Theological School

This perspective on the role of the chief academic officer is explored in one of six personal accounts of the office that comprise this issue of *Theological Education*. These reflective essays by theological school deans afford an inside view of the daily work of academic officers, its rewards and challenges, the lessons learned, and the distinctive ministry of academic administration. Any doubts about the widening scope of the dean's responsibility and the considerable influence of that office will be readily dispelled in these pages.

The academic deans and vice presidents represented here are part of a two-year Study of Chief Academic Officers in North American Theological Schools supported by the Lilly Endowment. Completed in June 1995, this was the first comprehensive study of the role of chief academic officers in the administration and leadership of theological schools. The project included the six commissioned essays, a survey of ATS chief academic officers, site visits to eleven theological schools in the United States and Canada, and five interinstitutional focus groups. Of all the writings based on this research, these personal essays afford the most intimate and sustained reflection on the deanship by those with firsthand experience of the office.

The six chief academic officers participating in the project are from different types of schools and at different stages in their administrative service. In the summer of 1995 when the essays were written, James Hudnut-Beumler and Gordon Smith had completed two years in their current positions; Brian McDermott and Elizabeth Nordbeck had served four and five years respectively; and Russell Richey and Jane Smith each had completed nine years. Even with their varying lengths of service and their work in diverse institutional cultures, these administrators develop in their writings remarkably similar themes. Their ideas and observations suggest a common character to the experience of deans that bridges institutional differences and speaks to academic officers and their colleagues throughout theological education.

Included with these essays is the text of an address by James L. Waits, executive director of ATS and a former dean, which he delivered at the ATS Conference for

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New Deans in October 1995. His statement that deans have “the best job in theological education” introduced an inspiring and helpful discussion of the dean’s role that now fittingly sets the theme for these essays.

Everyone associated with theological schools should find in this volume an invaluable guide to administrative practice. To present and future deans, this collection may serve as a reference with practical advice on entering administration and managing the work of the office. At the same time, it probes deeper issues of the spiritual challenges of the job and provides conversation partners for exploring the meaning of this distinctive ministry. To administrator and faculty colleagues, these writings give a clear picture of the multifaceted nature of the dean’s work and contain insights about how deans view their role in relation to the faculty and the institution as a whole. To board members, church leaders, and others associated with theological schools, these essays demystify the role of the dean and aid in understanding the contribution of academic leaders to theological institutions.

As project director, I am grateful to the authors of these personal accounts for their candor, insight, and generosity of spirit. This study will be successful if it not only increases our understanding of the reality and potential of the deanship, but if it also draws other talented and committed persons to administrative service. It is hoped that these essays will encourage theological educators to take a closer look at the complex and critical role of the chief academic officer and to become intentional about the preparation, recruitment, and retention of able academic administrators.

I also want to thank Craig Dykstra and Fred Hofheinz of Lilly Endowment for supporting this research and for their thoughtful and substantive contributions at every stage of the project.

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Research findings from the Study of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Schools are published in a series of *Monographs on Academic Leadership*. Three issues are currently available: Vol. 1 “Leading from the Center: The Role of Chief Academic Officer”; Vol. 2 “The Challenges of Academic Administration: Rewards and Stresses in the Role of the Chief Academic Officer”; Vol. 3 “Career Paths and Hiring Practices of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Schools.” To order, send a written request that includes your name, position, institutional affiliation, and complete address to: Jeanne P. McLean, *Monographs on Academic Leadership*, The Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity, University of St. Thomas, 2260 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. Copies are free, but quantities are limited.



# Academic Leadership: Roles, Issues, and Challenges

*Jane I. Smith*  
*Hartford Seminary*

A. K. Ramanujan once noted that one way to define diversity in the context of his home country, India, is to cite an Irishman's comment about trousers. Asked if trousers are singular or plural, the man responded that they are singular at the top and plural at the bottom.<sup>1</sup> This image applies quite strikingly to the context in which the chief academic officer / dean works.<sup>2</sup> The position is defined as one job, but the responsibilities are manifold. He or she is accountable both to a single institution and to a range of (sometimes competing) programs, activities, and commitments. And perhaps most important, the dean represents and, to a great extent, leads on the basis of an integrated institutional vision. But on a daily basis the dean must try to interpret that vision in light of the (sometimes competing) claims and priorities of its many participants.

The roles that the chief academic officer (CAO) is expected to play are many and varied, whether the expectations contingent on those roles are institutional or self-imposed. A number of questions relating to style, task, and identity need to be thoughtfully addressed. What kind of leadership is most effective with different persons and groups? Will this leadership be consistent with the expectations of the various constituencies of the school? Who are those constituencies and to which one(s) is the CAO most immediately responsible? What is the direct relationship of the academic officer to the president and other senior administrators, to the faculty, to the students, to the staff, and to the trustees? To what extent must the CAO identify with the faculty, and when does that identification blur and even compromise his or her identity as a senior administrator?

I would like to attempt to answer such questions in as personal a way as possible, in the hope that my own experiences might feed into the more general conversation about the nature of academic administration. My reflections come after six years as associate dean of academic affairs at Harvard University Divinity School, and at the end of nine years as vice president and dean of academic affairs at Iliff School of Theology. Perhaps the fact that I am leaving administration to return to teaching a few months after this writing will permit some distance and even some perspective on these difficult but very important questions. My comments will reflect my work at Iliff, a freestanding United Methodist school of theology.

## Academic Leadership: Roles, Issues and Challenges

While it is the president who has ultimate responsibility for the institution, on a day-to-day basis it is often the dean who is at the center of the operations. One might envision two concentric circles of persons and groups around the dean with whom he or she is in some contact. In the inner or closer circle are the faculty, students, trustees, senior administrators, staff, alumni/ae, and various advisory councils of the institution. Included in the wider circle of those relating to the school often directly to or through the dean are the university with which one's own institution is affiliated (if relevant); other educational institutions, including theological schools; one's own administrative and academic peers, and colleagues at those institutions; denominational officials, a direct relationship essential to the operation of a denominational school; local pastors; and occasionally representatives of other faith traditions with whom one interacts either personally or in connection with institutional commitments. All these relationships can be, and I would argue must be, direct ones between the dean and other first-hand parties. The dean is not the only representative of the institution to make these connections, of course, but it is often that person's responsibility to initiate, foster, and maintain them.

### **The CAO as Faculty Member**

While other senior administrators may be considered part of the teaching faculty, and indeed may offer a course now and then, it is the CAO who, more than anyone else, is both faculty and administrator. Understanding the dual nature of that role, as well as its complications, is essential. The academic officer who lets go of his or her identity as an integral part of the teaching faculty, its member as well as its leader, will be deprived of a source of strength and authority. There are several components to this identification. One is to associate oneself publicly with the faculty, to treat faculty as colleagues and fellow participants in the academic life of the institution. A second is to remain actively involved in the teaching program of the school. In my opinion it is essential for the dean to teach on a regular basis. In addition to offering one's own course(s), it is important to be available (and to invite invitations) to participate in courses taught by other faculty members. Such classroom involvement enables the dean to participate in as well as to administer the academic life of the school, to know and be known by students, and to stay in active touch with his or her own scholarly discipline.

A third component of academic identification is individual research and publication. I am a strong proponent of the notion that only by keeping personally involved in reading and research in one's own and related

fields canone keep fully alert in the classroom. It is also absolutely essential for the dean to provide leadership in research and publication, both as a model to the faculty and as a way of keeping the respect of one's colleagues within and outside of the institutions Theological schools that have active and productive faculties are sometimes under fire for being "too academic," out of touch with the everyday life of the church, irrelevant to the spiritual needs of their students. I have some real appreciation for these arguments, but feel strongly that they must be addressed without sacrificing the intellectual integrity or the academic enthusiasm of our faculties. The church without a sound intellectual base will, in my opinion, have a difficult time surviving the coming decades, and it is up to the faculties of our institutions to provide and sustain that base. The CAO plays a major role in modeling this enterprise. It is also the case that a significant part of the portfolio of CAO responsibilities is finding ways in which to communicate this crucial task to the churches, both assuring them of the commitment of the seminary to achieving this goal and helping them to strengthen their own educational programs.

### **The CAO as Educational Leader**

The dean, then, needs to have a clearly defined academic field and maintain serious activity within that field. In addition, chief academic officers increasingly are engaged in the enterprise of thinking critically about issues in theological education itself. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has fostered such conversation in a number of arenas, and it provides an outlet for essays on various themes related to theological thinking and teaching. A responsible dean needs at least to be up-to-date in reading this kind of literature and will profit personally as well as the institution by being an occasional participant in the conversations and publications on these issues. Part of this responsibility involves both keeping the faculty aware of current developments in theological education and speaking with church and other groups about new ideas and trends in religious thought and education.

The CAO is also the individual most immediately responsible for being in contact with the respective accrediting and standard-setting organizations such as The Association of Theological Schools and the appropriate regional association. This not only means serving as the primary contact person at the times of accreditation, but also involves keeping up on a regular basis with current conversations, trends in educational assessment, and new standards and requirements. Many CAOs attend to these responsibilities by involving themselves in

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committees and commissions of the ATS and/or by serving national or local agencies as members of accreditation teams. My own experience is that such responsibilities, while time-consuming, are extremely important in helping one understand the “larger picture” of academic/seminary life and in bringing vitality to the thinking and programming of one’s own institution.

### **The CAO as Representative to the Church**

The CAO, while not the only school officer to do so, needs to take significant responsibility for the relationship of the theological school or seminary to the church and to the denomination(s) to which it is most directly accountable. He or she literally must bridge academia and the church, and learn how to be articulate and persuasive about the essential relationship between the respective enterprises of these institutions. One dimension of this work for some schools, Iliff being an example, is the need to maintain oversight of its own denominational make-up. Denominational affiliation usually means that a significant portion of the faculty and of the student body should represent that denomination, and it is the responsibility of the dean to make sure that such concerns are factored into the recruitment of students and the development of the faculty. Another aspect of this responsibility of bridging church and school is helping the institution to define its mission and goal and the theological commitment(s) that undergird them. Once defined, the mission needs to be communicated effectively both to the students and other persons at the school and to the churches to help them understand what the institution is dedicated to achieving.

### **The CAO as Curriculum Leader**

All these elements contribute to what is obviously one of the essential tasks of the chief academic officer, that of helping to direct the conversation about and planning of the curriculum of the school. Most immediately, of course, this relates to the major academic (degree) programs. Increasingly it is also coming to mean leadership in thinking about how to deliver new forms of education, either to degree students who may not be able to be on campus regularly or to persons in a continuing education capacity who want further theological training. While responsibility for continuing education is often in the hands of another administrative officer, the dean must oversee and help generate new thinking in the offering of such programs and encourage faculty ownership of this aspect of the school’s

overall academic enterprise. Such programming needs to take advantage of developments in technology, finding new ways to use the communications network to package and deliver the educational products of the school.

### **The CAO in Spiritual Development and Formation**

There is a good deal of conversation in theological education today about the importance of spiritual/character formation. Students are looking for it, denominations are trying to figure out how to assess their pastors in this area, and schools are struggling with ways in which to define and provide for it in the classroom and other parts of the curriculum. The leadership role of the dean in this connection is not easy to define and will naturally differ considerably depending on the skills and inclinations of the individual CAO. To a greater or lesser extent, however, depending on the nature of the institution and the demands of the students, the dean needs to provide the kind of curricular support that balances strong intellectual preparation with development of a student's inner resources. It is very important for the dean to give serious thought to the development of her or his own style of leadership in light of concerns for character formation. The dean models for the entire institution a way of human interaction—with students, faculty, staff, and others. Whether or not the CAO sees himself or herself as playing a direct pastoral role, it is crucial that there be intentionality in providing leadership that conveys and fosters what one believes to be appropriate ways of human interaction and demonstrates care and support for all the members of the institution.

### **The CAO as Leader in Globalization**

In today's world of pluralistic realities, a crucial role of the dean is to provide leadership in helping the institution understand the importance of developing a broad base of learning and understanding. One dimension of this is a commitment to the pluralistic makeup of the school itself, helping it recognize the need for greater diversity in its student body, faculty, and other constituencies. That commitment must be founded on a sound philosophical base and reflected in the seminary's curriculum and other programs. A related but different dimension of the concern for pluralism involves attention to the importance of globalization in the context of theological education, understanding the relationship of the western church to the many church communities of the world, as well as the relationship of the Christian church to other faith traditions.

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The responsible dean, in my opinion, must help the institution to be in both ecumenical and interfaith conversations. Many schools have the resources of other theological institutions in their geographical areas with whom they can talk and share. Some have active councils of churches that can aid in fostering ecumenical theological conversation and instruction. In addition, I believe that theological schools, under the leadership of the dean, need to be aware of, and attend to, matters of interfaith dialogue. Few communities in our country today are without the presence of increasing numbers of persons representing a range of religious traditions. The seminary must model ways of communicating between Christians and non-Christians that can be employed by churches and other groups with whom our students eventually will be working.

### **Role-Related Issues and Challenges**

This complex set of roles and responsibilities that directly or indirectly fall under the purview of the chief academic officer suggest a range of critical issues and challenges that must be faced and addressed. One obviously relates to the question of identity. How does the dean insist on being an integral part of both faculty and administration without, on occasion, appearing to betray loyalty? While it is possible to assume both roles most of the time, on occasion it is necessary to locate oneself in one place over against the other. For the dean, this location finally must be with the administration. It is extremely important that from the outset this ultimate loyalty be understood by everyone involved. The dean is responsible to and for the faculty, but ultimately reports to the president. If the decisions of senior administration conflict with individual faculty interests or desires, those faculty may feel ignored or disenfranchised. The dean must be able to communicate to the faculty that this does not mean that faculty interests have been betrayed or that the CAO has somehow relinquished faculty identity. The ultimate bind for the CAO comes on those occasions, hopefully rare, when the president of an institution makes decisions with which the majority of the faculty disagree, and with which the dean is also not in agreement. There simply is no avoiding the pain of such a predicament.

It is important here at least to mention the special circumstances of a female chief academic officer. Recent studies of this phenomenon have provided important information about the issues confronting female senior administrators. On the one hand, I think that far too much can be made of the potential problems faced by a female CAO. Presumably the faculty and administration of an institution that either target or are open to a female dean are also open to treating and being treated by that dean in responsible and respectful ways. The woman who makes it clear from the beginning that she is deserving of that respect will, I think, find that gender issues are well under control.

On the other hand, it would be naive to assume that there are not realities of which a woman in a senior position must be aware. To some extent these may have to do with style. It is often, though certainly not always, the case that women adopt a more collaborative, even nurturing, style of leadership than men. This works well on some occasions, but at other times needs to give way to the ability to act individually without consultation. Knowing when and how to “switch” from one style to the other is a good trick. I suspect it is also the case that women in leadership positions have a little less latitude than men. If a woman appears to be too open to a range of points of view, she may appear to her male and female colleagues alike as “soft” and unwilling to make tough decisions that will be displeasing to certain members of her constituency. Alternatively, if she is too aggressive or assertive, she may seem hard, unyielding, or pushy. If a woman is ready to acknowledge such potential concerns and not trouble herself excessively with them, I believe that she may be able to bring some new kinds of gifts to senior administration that are effective and instructive in the running of an institution. One footnote to this discussion: Many women tend to be somewhat thinner-skinned than most men. This can be a problem. There is no question that senior administrators are on the front line of criticism, and one simply has to develop the kind of coping mechanisms that make it difficult for such critique to reach the bone.

It is clear from earlier comments on the many roles of the chief academic officer that one of the most critical issues is organization of one’s time. To attend to the various responsibilities that fall naturally into the dean’s “job description” takes careful planning if one is to survive without being (or feeling, which is probably worse) overwhelmed. Fortunately, most faculty understand that the responsibilities of the dean are broad and demanding, and they are glad that someone else is willing to assume them. That may not keep faculty from being critical when their own interests are challenged, but it can help prevent the dean from slipping into a “nobody knows how hard this is” mode. Little tips are tempting to offer: think carefully about time management, order your priorities, delegate responsibilities, etc. And these are important. For me, the best coping mechanism is to remind myself quite frequently that I actually do enjoy almost all of the range of responsibilities that are mine. One of the beauties of administration, if one’s personality suits it, is that the variety of the tasks keeps the job both interesting and challenging. Another is that it involves almost constant interaction with people, which provides a series of rewards. I would offer this advice, however, to the would-be senior administrator: If you do not (a) genuinely enjoy people, (b) like moving quickly from one issue to another, (c) find problem solving ultimately satisfying rather than worrisome, and (d) like to work hard (meaning most evenings and many weekends)—consider another line of work. You won’t like this one.

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The multidimensional nature of the CAO's responsibilities is a complex, interesting, and important one for president, faculty, and dean to discuss together. The very things that make the job of dean fun and exciting also complicate the matter of job definition and of institutional expectation. The secretary who sits at a desk from 8:30 in the morning until 4:30 in the afternoon may wonder what the dean is actually doing with his or her time. Are the meetings, luncheons, conversations with students, occasional travel, and many of the other genuinely enjoyable aspects of the job really work? If one accepts the wide range of activities suggested above as essential or even important to the responsibilities of a dean, how does one achieve some kind of balance among them? The fortunate academic officer will have the support of the president and trustees for a range of activities and the latitude to fulfill his or her various responsibilities with flexibility. Two things are at issue here. First, for one's personal integrity, it is necessary to have some clear idea of the importance of individual achievement both academically and professionally to the ongoing life of the institution. Second, it is crucial that all those who officially or unofficially "assess" the work of the dean, as well as those who deal with him or her on a daily basis, understand that the job involves both activity in the of fire and responsibilities in other locales.

Thus far I have outlined some critical issues that involve the dean as an individual in relation to the position. Other concerns are more institutional in character. I have found that the greatest challenge in my work as dean has been to try to keep the several deep commitments of the institution from working in competition with one another. The image of juggling comes to mind, in which one has to keep several balls constantly in the air. For Iliff, those balls are perhaps most easily identified as academic excellence, training for ministerial leadership, and the quest for diversity in as many dimensions as possible. Theoretically they should all be compatible, but in reality the priority put on one seems almost inevitably to call into question the commitment to one or two of the others. A juggler friend once told me that the secret to keeping the balls in the air is to understand them as invisibly connected, so that rather than flying off in different directions, they are all moving together in coordination even though only one at a time is in the hand. The dean must somehow both project this image of connectedness among priorities and lead in helping the institution understand the ways in which movement toward the realization of one does not necessarily mean neglecting or negating another. It is one thing to speak words of coordination and commonality, but it takes additional effort to help the institution see how to bring these about. Increasingly I believe that such effort must involve serious



redefinition of traditional assumptions about academic excellence, what ministry means, and what individual and community sacrifices may need to be made if there is to be real progress toward the elusive goal of institutional diversity.

Another institutional concern faced by deans in many denominational schools is the need for understanding, acknowledging, and working in concert with the stated goals and values of the supporting denomination. The dean plays a pivotal role in this. It may be that in certain cases what an institution understands as a major priority is not a priority for the denomination, and in fact is actually in opposition to some segment of its theological/ethical stance. The dean must work closely with the president and the board of trustees to find some way to bridge any kind of ideological gulf that may appear between school and denomination. The faculty (and, of course, students) occasionally find it easy to champion a particular cause or ideology without immediate concern for its possible ramifications in terms of denominational support. Senior administrators do not have that luxury.

### **The Lessons of Experience: Implications for CAO Development**

So what has this job taught me? That I am both better than I feared and not as good as I had imagined I might be. That what I am as dean may depend almost as much on how I perceive (and thus comport) myself as it does on how I actually perform on the job. That there is a strange combination of both giving and taking orders that pertains to the dean's relationship to the faculty, to the administration, to the trustees, and to the denomination, so that "leadership" is a constantly shifting phenomenon. And that progress is very elusive. While you may think that some problems are solved and pushed out the back door, suddenly you find them coming back again through the front door in only slightly different dress.

I have learned that there is an inherent loneliness in being a chief academic officer that is an odd partner to the fact that one is actually seldom alone. Trust must be parceled out with care, and the temptation to burden colleagues with information that they want but should not (yet) have is often beguiling. I recall hearing in my own seminary training years ago that pastors should look for their friends elsewhere than in the members of their congregation. The same is probably true for deans in relation to their faculties and other staff members. The dean is responsible for periodic evaluations of members of the faculty and staff, and needs to be able to do that with as much objectivity as possible. In turn, faculty and staff need to have the distance and the freedom to raise hard questions and, on occasion, to challenge decisions made by the dean.

And I have learned that the struggle to be humane in one's dealings sometimes becomes pitted against the reality of making decisions that are

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hard but necessary for the long-term good of the institution. This can give the appearance, not without justification, that one is guided by certain objectives in some cases and by others when the situation is different. That is both necessary and hard to live with. I have also reamed that making choices is the daily business of being a dean, and that with every choice certain people are hurt and disappointed. All requests cannot be met, all causes to which one has given verbal allegiance cannot always be supported, and all individuals cannot be pleased. Each choice means that something else (often dear to a person, a group, or even oneself) may not be able to be included or must be sacrificed.

The question of what kind of training is important for preparing academic of firers is one about which there may be considerable disagreement. Traditionally, senior administrators in academic institutions have come up through the ranks of the faculty. This has meant that in many cases they have reamed the fine points of administration through trial and error after having assumed the position. Frankly, I still think this is the best system, particularly for the chief academic of firer, though it may be less advantageous for other senior administrators. First, in reaming how to function as an academic of ricer I do not see any substitute for direct first-hand experience as a member of a teaching faculty. Second, I have argued that for the dean to provide appropriate academic leadership, he or she needs both to teach and to keep current in research and writing. Previous faculty experience would seem to be a prerequisite for that. While there is obviously much to learn about being an administrator, that one does not necessarily pick up as a faculty member, I think that most of it actually can and perhaps must be learned the hard way, on the job.

However, I also feel that there are several areas in which some specific training and preparation are in fact necessary, training that many of us in senior academic positions have not had. The first has to do with finances. The CAO must understand how to devise and manage an internal divisional budget, how to argue for his or her appropriate share of the total institutional budget, and how to interpret the fiscal and investment policies of the institution as a whole and (perhaps) influence those policies. This involves skills that range from a basic understanding of accounting to some grasp of economic trends nationally and internationally. In addition, in most institutions the CAO increasingly is being drawn into the business of crafting grant proposals. He or she needs to know how to write a proposal, what is reasonable to request, and what funding agencies most reasonably may be approached for different projects. One also must be able to persuade those agencies that "soft" monies provided will be translated into institutional commitments in the future, and to find a way to actually make that happen.

A second area in which special training is now virtually mandatory is that of computer technology. There seems to be little question that the

institution that does not have a grasp on how to restructure some of its educational programming to take advantage of the “information highway” is going to become obsolete quite rapidly. This may have ramifications for the kinds of academic offerings available on campus and most certainly will affect what it is possible for an institution to provide in terms of continuing and alternative programs. The CAO needs to be able to give informed leadership to this kind of new thinking and planning. Such knowledge is also essential in order for the dean to be able to assist both faculty and students in understanding how to access information for their own research and scholarship.

### **Academic Administration as Vocation**

Finally let me say a word about the question of administration as vocation. It is difficult to imagine that the senior administrator who did not see his or her institutional work to be a vocation would be either very satisfied or very effective in the position. Vocation in the technical sense, of course, means a calling. I am not sure that most of us who serve as CAOs necessarily feel called to administration as a profession. But then, I think the same could be said of scholarship, teaching, and in many cases even pastoral ministry. If one assumes, however, that vocation can mean not just what one is “called to” but what one is excited, challenged, and energized by, then surely administration can be just that. For me personally, and I believe for many of my colleagues in theological education, administration in fact is more than a vocation in a generalized sense—it is a form of ministry. It is a particular kind of service, a way of being as well as of thinking and doing, that challenges us to be understanding as well as authoritative, caring as well as provocative, and patient with individuals as we are impatient with systems that often are resistant to change. The trick is to remember the trousers—that the pluralities of groups, programs, and objectives that compete with one another at the bottom finally must be brought together in support of the single overriding purpose and educational mission of the institution. The chief academic officer who can achieve that has truly found her or his real vocation.

*Jane I. Smith was vice president and dean of academic affairs at Liff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, and professor of history of religion for nine years. Her primary area of teaching interest is the religion of Islam. She has done extensive work on Muslim communities in America and participates regularly in local, national, and international Christian-Muslim dialogue sessions. In January 1996 she became professor of Islamic studies and co-director of the MacDonald Center for Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut.*

**ENDNOTES**

1. "Where Mirrors are Windows," *History of Religions* 28, 3 (February 1989: 188.
2. I will use the titles "chief academic officer" and "dean" interchangeably in the remarks to follow.
3. It is also the case, of course, that should one wish to pass on the torch of academic administration to others and return to a teaching position, having kept academically "viable" is essential.

# A New Dean Meets a New Day in Theological Education

*James Hudnut-Beumler*  
*Columbia Theological Seminary*

## The Balancing Act of the Contemporary Dean

I came to the job at the relatively young age of thirty-five. As such, I suffered slightly under the stigma that attaches to youth. (I'm not complaining. There is probably a stigma that goes with every condition and position in life. Still there were days I would rather not have been referred to as "Dean Doogie.") Deans are supposed to be wise, experienced, knowledgeable, and established in their fields. On an earlier model, the dean was naturally the most senior, nonsenile member of the regular faculty. But that was in the days when the curriculum was set years in the past, was well understood by the faculty, and the dean's role was to keep a well-oiled machine running until the next caretaker took his [sic] place. The fact that we hold on to such cherished myths as the kindly old dean is, I think, both a symbol of our best hopes for a slower-paced way of academic life and a refusal to acknowledge the changes that have overtaken theological education in recent years.

Three of the changes of the last quarter-century seem, to me, significant enough to require comment: faculty longevity, increasing program complexity, and a growing division of academic labor. Faculty in theological education, though institutionally loyal by the standards of other occupations, are less likely now than formerly to have served the same institution their entire careers. These faculty members are also less likely to have attended the school at which they are currently teaching. Thus, institutional memory and practices are less likely to reside in the persons of the faculty. Given the changed context, a dean's job is a balancing act of recovering the tradition, enabling new faculty to embrace it, but also enabling faculty members old and new to create new traditions and practices that correspond to their collective vision of what God requires of theological education at that moment. No job today would be more deadly than that of a dean whose only role was to socialize new faculty members to the way things have been done for eighty-five years.

Faculty not only change, so do programs. In the last thirty years, most theological institutions changed their curriculums not once, but several times. Schools have also added programs in lay education, extension education, global

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and contextual education, and Doctor of Ministry programs, all of which make the typical school a more complex and lively institution than its 1950s antecedent. Often, however, it is the dean who, in the name of the faculty, is charged with holding the creative mess together in some kind of order and with some standards of educational integrity. Bringing creative order out of latent chaos is a good job for someone who likes that kind of work. Still, it is not the kind of work I, or my faculty colleagues, was trained for in graduate school. It is not surprising, therefore, that the most senior faculty member may not have either the gifts or the inclination to take on the role of dean today. Instead, our institutions have increasingly sought persons with administrative gifts to be their chief academic officers and to run their burgeoning special-purpose programs. At one level, this is good, for in the case of many schools it has opened the way for pastors and church leaders to play an active role in the life of a seminary. Our school's administrative ranks are filled with people with successful pastoral experience, and these people often do a better job modeling worship and group-process skills for ministry than those of us with academic doctorates.

This shift in who becomes a dean has, however, opened up the specter of a two-tiered faculty composed of "administrators" on the one hand and "real educators" on the other. Given such a bifurcated view of the seminary, the question arises for the dean, "Which are you?" Ultimately, this platform of "administrators versus teachers" is an unhealthy premise upon which to build educational institutions, but unhealthy still for seminaries that seek to instill in students the love of scholarship joined to practice in the service of God.

What do we mean by the word "administration"? For some administrators, it means "getting others to do what I want." For some faculty, it is "carrying out our directives, doing what is beneath faculty talent." It is both these views that stand in the way of administration being understood as a vocation on a par with scholarship and teaching. Either of these depictions of administration negates someone in the academic setting.

It is important to note that the cleavages in contemporary theological education are more complex than the simple "administrators versus teachers" dichotomy. I am surprised, for instance, by how much disdain some church leaders have for the academy. Some of our trustees and administrators talk very easily about what a mistake faculty tenure is. Others love the books produced for popular church-related presses but cannot understand why some of our other professors spend years working on manuscripts that only other scholars within the field will read. The idea that each of those popular works is built on a scholarly consensus forged in the latter kind of painstaking work is surprising news, maybe even suspicious news to this portion of the seminary's constituency. I find myself as dean often engaged in a process I liken to translation. I

explain the world view of the professors to the church constituency and interpret what the church is saying to the faculty. Let me hasten to add that the faculty, in my experience, has much greater comprehension of what goes on in the church than either the average clergy person or seminary critic thinks. Faculty members are often in a different church every other week and have a set of intimate informants in the form of valued former students that most bishops would gladly receive. On the other hand, because they are so smart, they do not suffer fools easily and have a tendency to put forward stunning conclusions in public settings whose acceptance is dependent upon a level of thought that the average layperson has never engaged and the average cleric is unwilling to entertain. The truth will set us free, it is said, after it makes us miserable.

### **Where Do Deans Come From?**

Given the balancing act of translation and mediation I have ascribed to the contemporary chief academic officer, it behooves us to ask, "Where then do deans come from?" Are good deans born, or made? From my own experience, I would suggest that nurture plays a far more important role than we might expect. Clearly the best deans bring to their work a devotion to people as well as a deep understanding of scholarship and scholars. But these qualities are not sufficient in most cases to help a person negotiate the shoals of academic leadership in most seminaries I know. If that were the case, most faculty members could step into the role of dean easily. Unfortunately, the laws of unintended consequences operate at full tilt in most of our institutions and even the best faculty promoted to dean quickly find that one must think ahead several steps further than one is used to doing in order to preserve community while enhancing educational norms of institutional practices. Most faculty are adept at reading students' reactions in a classroom setting. It is far more difficult to discern the outcome of a memo, but both activities involve action and interpretation. So the skills of academic leadership are related but not identical to those of teaching.

How then is one to attain the skills of academic leadership prior to assuming a position as critical as academic dean? I think the short answer is by using the skills in a less critical context first. This is somewhat akin to asking teenagers to practice driving in a parking lot prior to heading off for the interstate. I had a running start on this job of chief academic officer. I suppose you might call it being a petty academic officer. In fact, I was director of an honors academic program in the area of public policy for undergraduates at an elite university. It was good training for this job, for I was able to see the state of the art of teaching, program support, evaluation, and advising going on around me. Some of the

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successful practices I have brought to the seminary were learned from others in that university setting. I was also able to work with quality people among the faculty and students, which in retrospect was like a physician being allowed to practice on less complex patients before moving on to multiple diagnosis cases. Theological students bring tremendous complexity to the educational setting, and it was good to begin my “practice” with nineteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, of above average intellect, whose vocational objectives were largely irrelevant to the education in which we engaged. In a typical university or college one has more support to fall back on in the areas of psychological support, student discipline, and counseling than we have at the seminary level. I also was able to work in a less visible, less politically charged environment than the deanship and to have time to care about people and learn what’s worth taking time on and what can be avoided. My ability still to care for faculty and students in the face of hundreds of details, I owe to the time I spent at the university. There is one other thing I derived from those years and that was compassion for faculty born of a reduced intimidation. I found myself at work in relation to world-class faculty—people who had run the Federal Reserve, the National Security Council, and the Treasury Department—who were, nevertheless, insecure in the face of a freshly minted Ph.D. asking them to do something they had not yet done in teaching undergraduates.

Not all theological school deans can or should have prior outside administrative experience. There are some things only a theological educator will see. Therefore, if we are to have good deans at our schools, we should nurture the leadership of particular faculty members who have taken on limited administrative responsibilities. Area and department chairs, chairs of committees, and directors of programs with the help of a supportive dean and questioning colleagues can grow into the sort of persons we would want as our deans. The dean must be, among other things, excited about being a second-order educator. That is, if faculty members are principally hands-on educators, deans educate primarily through providing the structures and contexts through which that first-order education takes place. Catalogs, rules and degree requirements, budgets and curricula are all educational vehicles if properly understood. The subsidiary administrative tasks that involve faculty are a place where this understanding can be developed and through it a cohort of academic leaders.

I think I had a head start in this job in another way as well, and I owe that to my years growing up watching my father, and later my wife, as pastors. Remembering what real churches are all about is invaluable to any theological educator. But perhaps even more valuable to me were the countless lessons in working with volunteers in a Christian setting. Much of the dean’s role is parallel to the pastor’s. The quality of what gets done in each institution depends not on



fiat, or moralization, but on getting people to do what they want to do and have them want to do what they should. Where do deans come from? Above all, from a state of mind, engendered by a vocational commitment to the good that can be done through their institutions with their leadership.

### **Advice for Those Who Would Be Deans**

I am alarmed by how easily the deanship has eaten up some of my colleagues at other institutions. They have largely been undone by the inability to do the research they discovered was their spiritual nourishment. Or, they could not stand the pressure of being unjustly judged by their former friends and colleagues. Or, they couldn't tolerate the meetings. Each of these issues lies in wait for those who would be a chief academic officer. Nevertheless, I have noticed that there are some people I respect who have been happy deans for quite some time. Here is what I learned from them that seems to work. Bill McKinney, when he was dean of Hartford Seminary, called me before I even moved to Georgia. He told me to block out time for my own research. I'm glad I have. I'd recommend it to others for two reasons. First, you will not be happy if you always feel you gave up something to be dean. Second, you need to have time to engage in the practices of scholarship in order to effectively work with other scholars. It is too easy to fall back upon the thoughts one liked in graduate school, but unless one wishes to be like that preacher still using hoary old illustrations of something Col. House said to Charles Lindberg, one needs to read, to think, form opinions, and to test out ideas on peers.

"Love them that revile you." Deans from way back have had to learn this the hard way, just like disciples did. And just like Jesus said. More people will probably distrust deans because of the role they occupy than will dislike them for genuine reasons. Living well is the best revenge. In this case that means treating all decently and with respect, even when under attack.

Meetings can be our undoing, sapping our strength, dulling our creativity, and crowding out all else. But meetings at their best can be thought of as preventive medicine. Deans ought to be judged not only for the good they do but also upon the evil they prevent. Unfortunately, the dean's best work in this area is often hidden. Just as it is impossible to be a good dean without a good faculty of persons who would at least like to work with one another, it is impossible to be a good dean without solid working relationships with other senior administrators. A surprising amount of my time as dean is taken up with consideration of one policy, practice, or another in concert with other administrators. We spend hours trying to figure out how to close the seminary in case of snow, how to revise vacation policies for staff members in such a way as to be just for both

old and new employees, and how to protect library resources from the occasional dishonest user. Our product comes in the form of the hurt feelings avoided as much as in the other positive goods which are often elusive to achieve. It also comes in the form of good work done together that never could be done alone.

### **Some Thoughts on Academic Leadership in Theological Education**

Academic leadership in theological education is still an amateur's game compared to other sectors of higher education. I represent a school in the top quartile of ATS schools in terms of faculty, budget, and number of students. But when state and regional agencies ask, "Where is your planning officer?" or "Who is your chief evaluation specialist?" I recognize how small we are. Again, we have a large faculty by ATS standards, but a very small one by comparison to other schools in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Yet we are all affected by what Harold Hodgkinson called "emergence of the single standard" for institutions of higher education and the institutional complexity of running a school in an era where we care simultaneously about diversity, sexual harassment, nonviolent pedagogy, academic freedom and doctrinal purity. Often the point person for interfacing competing worlds and values is the dean. At the same time, the scale of our institutions *vis a vis* others requires a huge investment from theological school faculty. For instance, a school of fifteen faculty members and a university with 600 teachers probably have about the same number of persons involved in a tenure-review process. Duplicate that for every function of the freestanding school and one quickly becomes thankful that at least we in the theological realm do not have to oversee intercollegiate athletic programs.

I believe there is no work that is more important than helping people make sense of God in their lives. That is why I'm happy working to help form the "hands that would shape our souls." Still, I'm aware that not everyone agrees with me, and that the cultural position of today's theological enterprise is complicated in at least two ways. We must on the one hand work with some of the least equipped persons the church has ever had from which to make its ministry. The great influx of second-career students has brought our ministry great diversity in experience. Those of us trained in the humanities have also learned from these new students that there are many professions where a person can be successful without being able to communicate effectively in writing. The ministry, however, continues to be a word- and people-centered enterprise. Our new task is to achieve both theological literacy and what were formerly basic

communications skills. On the other hand, we face our educational challenge with resources produced by voluntary organizations—churches and denominations—that are themselves under great financial and social pressure to take care of things at home.

The personnel aspect of the dean's work is perhaps the single most important portion of his or her work. Too often I receive two kinds of applications from prospective faculty. The first is from the religious studies person who never tells our search committee why he (usually) or she (rarer) wants to teach at a seminary, much less ours. The second is from a minister who seems to believe that teaching would be a "piece of cake" compared to the parish. I am always on the lookout for those persons who love the church and Jesus Christ, but whose best service can be rendered in the vocation of teaching and who know it.

Once a search committee has selected a candidate for a position, the care and nurture of the new colleague falls heavily on the dean. The opportunities for this nurture range from the trivial (how to get photocopying done) to the dramatic (how to offer a course in an area very close to an established faculty member's "turf"). The teaching and the research that are at the core of a faculty member's calling will be choked off in an environment that is not conducive to academic flourishing. Setting the environment for faculty success is the dean's job.

I became dean in this time and place by accident of generational mishap. That is not entirely true, of course, but perhaps my story is instructive for the crossroads we have reached in American higher education and theological education more specifically. There are not enough forty-something scholars who want to do administration. A generation of persons whose experiences with the establishment taught it to distrust systems and eschew authority is now rising to the ranks of seniority in theological education. It appears it will soon fall to a younger cohort of church and academic leaders to run the seminaries. This will be a time pregnant with possibilities for damage done by inexperience, but also a time for fresh reconstructions of theological education by persons not habituated to particular ways of doing things. Which pattern will emerge from the possibilities hinges, I believe, on how we choose, train, and value our chief academic officers in theological education.

I would like to think I would still wish to be dean even if I were at the top of the professional rewards ladder when asked. More importantly for theological education, I would like to see other colleagues who conceived of the deanship as a means to fulfill their vocations as educators. Teaching is, after all, a privilege and so too is academic leadership. We all know that we shape minds in the classroom. What we need to remember is that with academic leadership we form the environment for that transformative educational moment. Whether good education happens or not is the product of what the teacher does and a panoply

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of other factors with which the dean is often much more closely involved than the professor.

### **A Final Word**

A day in the life of the dean is often busy, but rarely boring. With the right spirit, there is joy, even fun, to be experienced. The solitary person need not apply, for human interaction is in the nature of the role. And though the dean must sometimes make a decision all alone, the role is not lonely. The opportunity to share ideas, to be part of plans, to extend the good that is done through one's institution are rewards enough for those who would undertake the so-called "burden" of leadership.

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# The Once and Future Dean: Reflections on Being a Chief Academic Officer

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Over the past seventeen years I have been involved with theological education—as professor, dean of students, and chief academic officer—at seminaries of the American Baptist Churches and the United Church of Christ. With the exception of a Ph.D. that equipped me to teach and write in the general area of American religious history and the particular area of Puritan studies, I (like most of my colleagues in seminary administration) had no formal training to prepare me for what I was eventually to spend most of my time doing. Hence the opportunity to write about the work of chief academic officers is both challenging and humbling.

The following observations, therefore, are not intended as definitive but as suggestive. During these many years, I felt myself passing through several clearly defined phases before I acquired clarity either about my own vocation or about the demands of the positions in which I found myself. I offer these admittedly idiosyncratic insights as a way to bring conceptual order to my own pilgrimage and, perhaps, to give some guidance to those whose vocations may follow similar paths, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

## Phase One: What am I doing here?

On April 6, 1981, I was elected dean of the faculty at a mid-sized denominational seminary. I was thirty-three years old and three years out of graduate school, with a doctorate in church history. Being an academic administrator was not part of my career trajectory. Administrative skills were not part of my repertoire.

How did this happen? At the time, I believed that my older, wiser colleagues (all male) saw in me energy, capability, and leadership potential that I did not yet see in myself. Later I came to believe that my older, wiser colleagues were unanimously unwilling to work with a fractious president (subsequently fired by the board of trustees) who had already frustrated and tired two deans before me. Moreover, having acquired a characteristically decanal cynicism (and having quickly learned the meaning of phrases like “unconscious sexism”), I believed that my colleagues had elected me because as a young, nontenured

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female I was perceived as more easily expendable and more likely to be an irenic, maternal mediator between president and faculty. Now, fifteen years later, I suspect both scenarios were partially true. But today I am most inclined to wonder, not about the “real truth” in this life-shaping moment, but about God’s mysterious and labyrinthine ways: for in a strange transmutation over the years, administration has become for me a vocation and not an accident.

No one plans to become a dean.<sup>1</sup> I have yet to meet a graduate student who has exclaimed to me hopefully, “I want to be the CAO of a seminary someday!” Most of us become deans by chance, not long-range design, and this is true whether we come to our deanships by faculty rotation, appointment from within, or election from without. Perhaps for this reason deanships occupy an uneasy and ambiguous position on the ladder of upward mobility. Although decanal salaries may exceed those of faculty members, in the seminary world deanships are accorded the universal prestige of neither presidents nor professors; indeed, prevailing academic culture suggests that no one with their wits about them should *want* to be a dean. A dean is the workhorse middle manager, the butt of countless academic jokes (“education is too important a business to leave to deans”), the intermediate functionary with neither the policy-making power of a president nor the hands-on power of a faculty member. Nevertheless, deans *do* have influence in the world of theological education; and many continue to find the possibility of such a position attractive.

Although the seminary job chart, if there is one, often designates deans “second in command,” CAOs differ from CEOs in several ways. While the role of a seminary president is fairly predictable, a dean’s role may vary—depending on institutional culture—from that of senior school official to faculty gofer. Often presidents are selected from the worlds of business or parish, where transferable skills in administration and finance have already been well-honed. Deans typically emerge from the ranks of faculty, where all other skills are secondary to those required for research, writing, and teaching. Hence deans, unlike most presidents, learn their trade *in medias res*, by instinct, trial and error.

This is not altogether bad, although for a new dean it may be somewhat unnerving. In the first months of my first deanship, I fought the recurring conviction that I was not, after all, a *real* dean (real deans know what they are doing); my gracious colleagues, having foolishly elected a neophyte to serve, were merely humoring me in seeking aid and advice. In this, of course, I was dead wrong. My colleagues both expected and needed their dean, even a novice dean, to broker the information flow, policy decisions, long-range plans, and daily details that enabled them to accomplish their own work efficiently and effectively. And in the end it was my own brief, former life as a faculty member that provided the best training for this new role.

It is often said that faculty are the heart of a school. I am convinced that this statement is true. The rest of us could be seized at the rapture, but if the faculty remained (as some are convinced they would), the essential tasks of education might go on—for a while. Sooner or later, however, administrators would have to be reinvented, simply to ensure that things continue to work. Despite their occasional antagonisms, faculty members and administrators exist in a lopsided kind of symbiosis: without faculty, academic administrators would not have jobs, but without administrators, faculty would not enjoy an orderly, unencumbered environment in which to do their work.

Remembering these things, I came quickly to formulate *Axiom # 1: A dean's primary task is to enable the faculty to accomplish their primary tasks and those of the school: good teaching, sound scholarship, and the preparation of leaders for the church.* This task involves numerous sub-tasks, all of which contribute to the faculty's ability to function effectively and, just as important, to their sense of self-worth—for example, monitoring equitable workload and class assignments, planning faculty meetings, naming enough (but not too many) committees. This task of enabling is not, of course, the sole task of the dean, nor is it a task solely of the dean. But perhaps it is the task that most clearly distinguishes the dean's portfolio, whether the latter's ruling motif is that of "gofer" or "administrative superior."

## **Phase Two: Actually, this is enjoyable.**

During my second year as dean, the seminary's president was dismissed. It was a time of great institutional difficulty: finances were shaky, the faculty was divided, the constituency was confused. One day my predecessor in the dean's office paid a pastoral call. "How *are* you doing?" he asked, eager to offer advice and sympathy from his preferred post as ex-dean. But the truth was, *I was into it.* I had begun to admit certain guilty secrets to myself: that while I did genuinely love teaching, there were some things about it I didn't love at all, like grading papers and writing recommendations. That sometimes I actually enjoyed *being in meetings* more than being in the library. Even that the chaos of the past few months, while painful, had not been without challenge and interest.

There are at least four kinds of people who should *not* become chief academic officers: those who are happiest among stacks of books and at classroom lecterns; those who relish the satisfying sense of work completed; those who thrive on calm and predictability in their daily routine; those who agonize fiercely over conflict and criticism. Being an administrator is neither more nor less difficult than being a professor. It is, however, *different.* And like any job, administration is more palatable to certain kinds of persons than to

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others. I have known several erstwhile deans whose years in administration were purgatorial, not because they weren't effective deans but because they weren't happy ones. The good logic of lifting academic officers out of the faculty obtains only when the "liftee" understands how radically changed his or her life will become thereby, and is still willing to give it a try.

Even for those of us who are comfortable with a demanding and unpredictable workday, administration is not without real frustration. In my role as dean of a seminary small enough for everyone to know—and feel comfortable walking in on—everyone else, the initial and overriding frustration was my seeming inability to complete even the shortest, simplest task without interruption. A closed-door policy violated the institutional ethos, as well as my own convictions about accessibility and sociability; an archaic telephone system routed every call to the dean's office straight through to my desk. Trips to the restroom resulted in extended, unscheduled conversations about school business. Blessed days with no writing on my calendar miraculously metamorphosed into strings of spontaneous one-on-one meetings. For a time I ceased to go out for lunch, but people quickly learned that I could be found alone at my desk between noon and one.

What finally offered psychic—and eventually practical—relief was a visit from one of our recent graduates. She was a woman in her mid-fifties who, having raised six children and buried a husband, had finally answered the childhood call to ordained ministry. Her church was small, rural, needy, and she went to it with the zeal of a freshly minted pastor ready to summon the eschaton singlehandedly. In this she was deeply frustrated. "I felt as if I wasn't doing ministry at all," she told me. "Every time I tried to plan something, I got interrupted. Until I finally realized that the interruptions *were* the ministry."

And so it is with academic administration. The interruptions *are* the work—indeed, the ministry—for that, as Paul knew, is what administration surely is. Since then I have preached my student's wisdom publicly many times over, but mainly I have preached it to myself on those days when interruptions threaten to bury the "other" work piling up on my desk.

This moment of personal epiphany did not, however, solve the real problem of getting routine tasks done in an efficient and timely way. Although a chief academic officer is typically responsible for long-range curricular planning and oversight, many if not most of the daily tasks of deaning consist of nitty-gritty detail work. Sometimes this work can be put off for a time, but it cannot be put off for long without initiating a domino effect of institutional disruption. My eventual solution was to absent myself from the office on one day each week—a strategy that takes both firmness of will and advance planning if it is to happen at all. Thus at the beginning of each academic year I place all known important



events on my calendar—classes, faculty and trustee meetings, ceremonial and other gatherings—and then pencil in a day for each week. Rarely is it the same day two weeks running. In the beginning I felt guilty about not being perennially present on campus, and after ten years it is still difficult to say “I’m not available” when people want to schedule a meeting on the day I plan to be away. But I have become quite disciplined about not violating these “writing days,” as my staff calls them. And writing is mostly what I do: correspondence, reports, sermons, class preparation, proposals of various sorts, public lectures, scholarly work—all the essential tasks that for me demand time free from interruptions. This practice suggests *Axiom #2: A dean needs to be aware of his or her work style, and then devise concrete personal strategies that minimize frustration and maximize efficiency. Axiom #3 is: abandon unnecessary guilt and stick to your strategies.*

### **Phase Three: Good grief, I haven’t published anything.**

The final year of my five-year term as dean coincided with the arrival of a new president, who announced his intention to change the deanship from a term-limited faculty position to a permanent administrative one. Although it was not an easy decision, I declined the opportunity to continue. There were a number of reasons, personal and philosophical, for that choice. Foremost among them was the knowledge that I had never really practiced in a sustained way the scholarly craft that had fitted me for theological education in the first place. So I returned to the teaching of church history full-time, and to pursue work on several writing projects that had long been on the back-burner.

This transition was not as easy as I had imagined. Personally it was difficult to shift from a daily rhythm shaped by external imperatives to one shaped largely by the internal demands of teaching and research. Moreover, the tenure and promotion process, delayed involuntarily until my eighth year of service by transitions in the president’s office, proved perplexing. Neither tradition nor policy offered any guidance for dealing with the anomaly of a junior faculty member who had served as a senior administrative official. The situation was eventually resolved satisfactorily, but it was not until I temporarily ceased being a dean that I identified one more thing that every would-be academic officer—and the institutions that hire them—should know before taking the plunge into administration.

It is not only *whether*, but *when*, one chooses to become an administrator that is important. Chief academic officers have long been drawn from faculty members in mid-to-late career, that is, from persons whose ranks and reputations are well-established in both their scholarly guilds and their particular workplaces. Today, however, in my own admittedly unscientific observations

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are accurate, more seminaries are selecting younger academic officers. It is not hard to imagine why. Younger deans offer institutions high energy and fresh ideas; lacking longevity, they also offer a reduced salary burden. Even more significant, administrators drawn from newer faculty are much more likely to be women and/or minorities, and their appointment to high-profile positions says clearly to a watchful public, "This institution is responsive to the concerns of underrepresented constituencies." Furthermore, because the presence of such persons in visible roles can increase enrollment from the groups they represent, their employment may also be related, if only indirectly, to institutional hopes for enhanced recruitment opportunities.

Clearly there are good reasons for selecting younger CAOs, but there are also potential mine fields if institutions and individuals fail to think preemptively about what they are doing. In schools where academic officers are normally tenured in their own disciplines, younger CAOs with recent doctorates may raise thorny questions about long-term retention and promotion. What criteria, for example, should be used to assess the "scholarly progress" of someone whose time and energy have been focused mainly on administrative matters? This is a double dilemma: if administrative contributions are part of the equation for appraisal, then tenure or promotion may be only tenuously related to one's discipline. But if scholarly contributions are determinative, a dean may effectively be *penalized* for performing faithful administrative service.

For the new CAO, the decision to serve as an administrator may have profound vocational consequences that are initially unforeseen. This is especially true if, after a stint as dean, one decides that the administrative life is best led by someone else. Although I am acquainted with a few stalwart souls whose iron wills and constitutions enable them to be at once efficient administrators, productive scholars, and attentive family members and friends, the truth is that most of us have to make hard choices among these several desirables. Research and writing are usually the first tasks to be jettisoned. This may not be a serious problem if one has already established a scholarly reputation, but if one has not, a hiatus of three to five years at the beginning of a career can create a permanent handicap, making it difficult for a person to move upward or even laterally to a teaching position at another institution. Tenure itself may even become a career liability, for if administrative contributions are heavily weighted in the awarding of tenure, one may thereby become instantly underqualified for comparable teaching positions elsewhere. Hence, *Axiom #4 for both schools and individuals: be aware of the timing of your administrative appointments and assess the possible consequences in advance.*

### **Phase Four: Maybe this is a calling.**

After serving as professor of church history for three years, I was invited to become CAO at a denominational seminary roughly twice the size of my first school. Although I had not actively sought a new deanship, this time I was ready. I knew what I was going to (or thought I did) and what I was leaving behind; I also knew something about what the job demanded. I was pleased that others (having now some data on which to base an opinion) thought me capable of the position. Above all, I knew that I was eager to return to this stimulating work that seemed at the very heart of church and academic life. What I did not yet know was just how much schools—and their deanships—can differ.

In my prior school, as “Dean of Faculty,” I had served as coordinator of faculty programs and spokesperson for faculty concerns. I was not expected to provide evaluative oversight of personnel; indeed the tacit assumption was that dean and faculty were peers with somewhat different functions. In that system, decanal authority was personal, residing mainly in one’s political savvy and persuasive rhetoric. At my new institution, I became “Dean of the Faculty and Vice President for Academic Affairs.” Here the expanded title indicated a very different model of deanship. To be sure, the dean was still of and for the faculty, but the title “Vice President” signaled that the office was also of and for the administration, understood as distinct from those who taught. Here a quasi-union, the Faculty Association, explicitly excluded from its monthly meetings all of those whose primary duties were administrative; here, too, the dean assessed faculty performance and even assigned faculty salaries. In this system decanal authority was formal and official, with tasks and expectations spelled out in a *Faculty Manual*. Faculty expected their dean to speak for them, but also *to* them, as one whose expertise was located both in a scholarly discipline and more generally in theological education.

A second adjustment awaited me concerning relations with staff and students. In my former school, only two persons reported to the dean: a secretary shared with the registrar, and the registrar herself. Their heavy workload made it logical for me to do many of my own tasks of daily maintenance. Now there were seven persons who reported to me, both program personnel and support staff, along with another five for whom I had indirect oversight. Hence, for the sake of efficiency, my secretary and administrative assistant expected to answer my telephone, open my mail, and coordinate my calendar—and they were not relieved but discomfited when at first I performed these familiar tasks myself. I, of course, believed I was acting like a conscientious “team player” rather than an inefficient dean.

## Reflections on Being a Chief Academic Officer

My relationship with students also changed dramatically in this new setting. Most deans are teaching deans, and formerly I had taught two and occasionally three classes each year, including two required courses. I knew personally almost every student in the system. In my new position, after an abortive attempt to duplicate that pattern, I cut back to a more realistic one course per year. Suddenly I found that I knew only a small percentage of our current students by name—and most of these I encountered for the first time when they were in academic trouble or were irritated with school policies. Whereas in the past familiarity with students occasionally made disciplinary situations difficult, now *unfamiliarity* achieved exactly the same result, because the dean's office was the place where discipline was exacted by a person hardly anyone knew very well.

Becoming a seminary dean is not unlike becoming a pastor in a local church. In both cases one's chances for success are better if one knows something about the particular institutional culture of one's new setting. This is especially important with respect to two matters: prevailing expectations regarding academic leadership and internal patterns of communication. The relative size of a school—both of staff and of student body—may affect these variables significantly.

It is an often-repeated truism that all competent administrators both serve and lead, but the truth is that some administrators are expected to serve a good deal more than lead, and vice versa. Denominational culture, past events, and current institutional needs all shape the way a dean is expected to perform in a particular setting, and no single model of decanal leadership is necessarily superior to another. Indeed, exactly where on the continuum of authority one's own deanship resides—tilted toward a pyramidal model of hierarchy or toward an equalizing model of shared governance—makes little difference *provided* one is aware of, and comfortable with, that niche.

*Axiom #5, therefore, is: know what kind of dean you're supposed to be. Unfortunately, an institution's preferred model of deanship is not always immediately apparent—nor will all segments of a community necessarily prefer the model that apparently obtains.* My successor as dean, for example, was the first outsider elected to that post, and the first to serve as "Dean of the Seminary" (rather than "of the Faculty"). Both he and the president, at whose behest the changes occurred, understood this model of deanship to be primarily administrative: although the new dean still worked closely with faculty members, his role now involved oversight more than advocacy. The faculty, however, with several generations of advocate-deans in their collective consciousness, were not quite ready for this shift, and the new dean's tenure was a brief three years. Anyone contemplating a deanship, therefore, may be well advised to ascertain directly from president,

faculty, and trustees—and not simply from formal written job descriptions—what their understanding of the dean’s role is. If these understandings vary widely, a would-be dean may wish to look elsewhere for a position.

In the same way it is extremely helpful for a dean to know something about the way people habitually communicate in his or her institution. Most seminar-ies are of an “in-between” size, that is, they may resemble either a “family” business, with informal, word-of-mouth patterns of communication, or a more structured, segmented business, where written communication is typical. At my first school, oral communication was the radical norm. (In twelve years there, I never saw either a formal job contract or a letter of hire that spelled out benefits and expectations; in fact, I have no official documentation that indicates I was ever the dean). In that setting, written communication at best suggested pretentious formality; at worst it hinted at a kind of veiled hostility, as if the writer found it necessary to initiate a paper trail of some sort. At my second school the reverse was true. There, hardly a communicable thought went unrecorded, despite a warmly collegial environment among both faculty and staff. I quickly learned, for example, not simply to *tell* faculty members about attendance at meetings, because they did not consider themselves actually told unless they saw it in writing. Our savvy interim president, lamenting the number of trees killed for the sake of routine notices, vowed to use the telephone whenever he wanted to convey information, but within six months, he, too, was penning daily memos. (E-mail, incidentally, for those schools that have it, eliminates the slaughter of trees but not the basic conflict between written and oral cultures.) In short, patterns of communication are a deeply entrenched part of an institution’s ethos; knowledge of these patterns *in the beginning* of one’s tenure can make life easier for an academic officer, much of whose daily work depends on communicating effectively. *Axiom #6, therefore, is: know the voice with which your community speaks, and speak with it.*

One addendum concerning communication is worth posting: in most institutions, the really important information is often relayed *after* meetings are over and announcements are made—in hallways, parking lots, cafeterias. Gossip has an undeservedly bad reputation; most of the time it simply consists of the true—and truly important—matters that people are uneasy about broadcasting publicly. Effective deans will make it their business to be aware of staff and faculty feelings that may be of great significance to institutional life. Ideally this will happen naturally, because a dean is deemed trustworthy by colleagues, but it is never a bad idea to locate one or two wise and well-connected faculty members who can be relied on to share gossip discreetly. *Axiom #7 is: the last thing a dean should be is the last one to know.*

### **Phase Four, Part 2: If this is a calling, why do I feel like Ms. Job?**

Three years after my election to a second deanship, I was asked to resign. Although this personal saga would probably not be duplicated by another dean in a thousand, ours was a unique story that nevertheless throws light on a nearly universal decanal dilemma. This was the situation: on the eve of my election to the deanship, the school's president died suddenly and unexpectedly. Some months later his successor was named—a perhaps hasty choice that, in retrospect, represented a deeply unfortunate mismatch of institutional needs and personal competencies. Within a relatively short time, faculty and staff had united in their opposition to what they believed was inadequate leadership, and the president subsequently resigned, just two-and-one-half years into his tenure. The board of trustees responded by seeking my own resignation and that of the vice-president for institutional advancement; they argued that a failure at the presidential level must mean complicity among senior staff. Believing that our good reputations were at stake, however, and with the full support of the faculty, both of us declined to leave and sought legal counsel. Two months later, after numerous meetings, informal conversations, and a formal hearing, the trustees unanimously rescinded their earlier vote.

Deanships are perhaps the most precarious positions on the seminary job chart. Whether or not a dean's title reflects it, most deans function as the chief connector between faculty and administration. It is the dean who must relay information about faculty life and concerns to the president and board; it is also the dean who will interpret the decisions of the president and board to the faculty. In practice, this means that both faculty and president may expect the dean to be "their" colleague and confidante. Make no mistake about it: this can be a difficult balancing act. It requires not only tact, personal integrity, and well-developed diplomatic skills, but also, at times, the willingness to suppress one's own opinions while advocating for someone else. (This latter is no easy task for academics, who by training tend to value argumentation and not acquiescence.)

A non-dean once asked me if it was worse for a dean not to get along with the faculty or not to get along with the president. The answer may depend in part on one's formal location in the system (as, for example, "Dean of Faculty" or "Academic Vice-President"). But the fact is that every dean in some sense serves these two masters; in the absence of a good working relationship with both the president and a strong majority of the faculty, a dean simply cannot do his or her job effectively. Indeed, *triangulation*—dean aligned with president against faculty, dean aligned with faculty against president—is one of the occasional dangers of this office. Even a dean who *refuses* to align publicly may also be suspect: in my own case, some trustees interpreted intentional neutrality as

willful dereliction of duty, since from their perspective the dean's primary responsibility was to support the president.

Short of resignation, there may not be much that a dean can do except endure the difficult interpersonal situations that will, now and again, be encountered in office: the president with whom one discovers (too late) that one has major philosophical differences; the faculty member who has an undeclared quarrel with one's theology, gender, or other defining attribute. Being a dean, like being a president, requires a healthy ego and constant verbal restraint. But anyone contemplating a deanship may also find it helpful to realize that:

1. *Deanships are not personal.* By this I mean that faithful good will in dealing with others, essential as it is, will not guarantee that others will deal with you in like manner when disputes arise. For example, if budgetary constraints force cutbacks in faculty travel funds, a dean can expect trouble regardless of the good will generated by previous personal interactions and regardless of the stated logic of this strategy. Administration, by and large, has to do with mediating groups and group interests. In situations of conflict deans will not be judged as individuals according to their goodness of heart, but according to where they stand on the issues at stake. (This is an especially hard learning for Christian administrators schooled to "do unto others" with the expectation that their Christian colleagues will do likewise.)

2. *Deanships are not tidy.* I have already written about the tyranny of small daily tasks. But it is also true that the really big decanal tasks—the ongoing ones that have to do with curriculum, with underrepresented constituencies, with the school's relationship to the churches—will never be completed satisfactorily, either. This is because they are related to changing realities in the wider culture; hence every good solution or innovation is temporary, and almost none will be inaugurated to universal acclaim. No matter what or how well they are doing, therefore, deans can expect regular calls, visits, and letters telling them what they are doing wrong and how they can do it better.

3. *Deanships are not permanent.* "Rotating" deans already know this, and also know to what they will return after they have served their time. But for others, even those who have an open-ended appointment, this is an important understanding. Although there are many deans who have served in the same institution for a decade or two, most have far briefer tenures. Moreover, because denominational schools often seek one of their own for academic leadership, it is difficult to be a "professional dean," that is, one who moves intentionally from institution to institution over a lifetime career of deaning. The would-be academic officer is wise to engage in some anticipatory self-interrogation: What will I do next if I should cease to be a dean? What connections—ecclesial, scholarly, administrative—should I maintain while I am serving as dean, in order to keep vocational options open?

## Phase Five: The Once and Future Dean

In the aftermath of my near-resignation (what the institution came to call our “rainy season”), I received, to my surprise, a flurry of invitations to candidate for seminary presidencies. This confirmed the old Madison Avenue adage that even negative publicity is better than no publicity at all. More important, it confirmed that I did not feel called to become a president in the foreseeable future; I was happy being a dean.

There is a certain obvious logic in moving seminary deans into seminary presidencies. Deans understand theological education and its peculiar challenges; they have experience in higher education administration; they have useful contacts and colleagues in the business. Undoubtedly the temptation to upward mobility is great: I don’t know a single dean who has not on occasion assessed some presidential action and concluded, “I could have done that better!” A few deans do choose to become presidents, and some of them make the transition well. Nevertheless, these two jobs are very different indeed; they require different skills, competencies, and—perhaps most important—different passions.

If a president is understood as the architect of a school’s direction, a dean is the builder. If a president needs to have broad vision, a dean needs to have focused inventiveness. It is the dean who, working with faculty, gives form and substance to the president’s vision, and it is the dean who, working with the president, monitors and marshals resources for the faculty’s specific designs. Deans, therefore, must have a passion for detail, for hands-on work, for making connections. Deanships are positions of enormous, and yet often nearly invisible, influence. Hence, a dean must derive pleasure from being a facilitator, from helping other people’s ideas and efforts bear good fruit.

A dean must also have a passion for (and acquaintance with) scholarship and teaching, even if he or she no longer has the time to be a practicing scholar. As today’s seminaries increasingly confront tough financial challenges, the attention of presidents is being focused externally, toward fund-raising activities and constituency development. This means that deans will typically be “minders of the shop,” overseeing curriculum, faculty development, and even student services. Above all, a dean will relish the role of “chief insider,” shaper of educational policy and caretaker of academic life. And so I suggest a final—and most critical—*Axiom #8 for all who contemplate academic leadership: choose to become a dean because you love this special calling, not because you long someday to be president.*



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#### ENDNOTES

1. The term "dean" describes a multitude of positions, including those that essentially function as presidencies in university-related divinity schools. (In such institutions, chief academic officers are normally designated by such titles as "Associate Dean for Academic Affairs," or the like). For convenience, however, I shall generally use the shorter term "dean" to refer to CAOs hereafter.



# To a Candidate for Academic Leadership: A Letter

*Russell E. Richey*  
*Duke University Divinity School*

Dear Friend,

Congratulations. I guess. It is an honor to be invited by a university divinity school to be academic dean.<sup>1</sup> But it is a dubious honor, as you will quickly discern if you accept the offer. Its dubious character will be noted by your present colleagues who will greet your impending departure and the transition with bemused expressions, condolences, wonderment. They will ask you, in a kidding tone, why you have decided to leave the ancient and honorable profession of teaching. Implicitly, they characterize your new post and define you out of teaching, out of the faculty, out of the guild. The colleagues may console you for giving up your scholarly standing and the leisure to research and write with the soothing comfort that you have already made your contribution to the field. They may wonder aloud that you, whom they had trusted and believed one of them, have now gone over to the enemy. They will want to know what has possessed you.

## Counsel

You have written to ask whether to accept the offer.<sup>2</sup> To such a query I can best respond by offering some homespun reflections about the office, its rewards and frustrations, and the demands that it would place upon you. In so doing, perhaps, I may give you some ideas about how to answer your colleagues as well. What might possess one to take an academic deanship?

The first thing to say, I believe, is that you need to take the query about possession and your colleague's kidding reactions seriously, recognize that such perceptions betray ingrained faculty attitudes, and decide whether you can live within a deanship even partially so defined. You do, in a very strange way, leave the faculty by becoming a dean or academic dean. You don't do so technically, officially, legally. The academic dean, in most by-laws, will be defined as a faculty member, be tenured or tenurable, hold a variety of posts that only a faculty member can hold, execute faculty decisions, exercise the office for the faculty, represent it, speak on its behalf, and eventually return to its ranks. Faculty status, duties, and roles you should do everything you can to maintain

## To a Candidate for Academic Leadership

and enhance (as I will indicate later). Nevertheless, colleagues' kidding reminds us that faculties do understand deans to be different. Such perceptions have to do with the prior incumbents, with the powers in the office and conflict around their use, with access to privileged information about colleagues, with roles in promotion and salary-setting, and with the loyalty that the dean owes to the administration. These perceptions of deans grow out of the school's own culture and history, are unique to each school, but nevertheless do typically mark the office off from the faculty. You can reasonably assume that your new faculty or some portion thereof would believe something like the following: Deans are different. Deans *work for* the school. The faculty *is* the school. The dean is an administrator, a functionary, a holder-down-of-a-position, a term-server. Deans come and go. The faculty, on the other hand, is forever. Deans belong to the realm of secular organization, of professionalization, of bureaucracy, of scientific management, of devotees awaiting the latest word from Peter Drucker. Faculty belong to the realm of guild, of apprenticeships, of reclusive study, of libraries, of the ancient counsel from the sages.

Of course, as I will try to indicate below, faculties and deans need each other; they cannot function without each other; the health and well-being of the guild depends upon effective leadership by the dean; the dean is not really a dean without the support of the faculty; governance is and must be a shared endeavor; and faculties understand and affirm more of the dean's role than the contrived definitions and sharp lines would ever suggest. Neither the caricature of dean nor of faculty really holds. Faculties belong as much to the modern world—to the realm of computers, e-mail, highly organized effort, Weberian rationality—as do deans. But the caricatures nevertheless reveal attitudes. In accepting the post, you have to be willing to live with the caricature of you as dean that the faculty will hold. Talk about it; laugh about it; poke fun at it; make it work for you. Make it work for them; be good enough in administration to improve their life; your efficiency can make the faculty's work easier. Of course, your skill there only reinforces the caricature. So, remember that deep down the faculty does believe that *it* is the school.

Second, as dean you would need to be willing to adapt to another culture, that of the new divinity school. Faculties find nothing more off-putting than constant reference to your old institution, to "how we did it there," to comparisons with its strengths, to use of its lingo, and especially to its members as possible candidates for an opening. One adage must be written at the top of every agenda and kept in mind whenever you speak: "Respect the institution's own ways." Little things matter. If the board was called "Trust" at your old school and "Trustees" at the new, steel yourself to say "Trustees." Considerable restraint is required because the most natural tendency, a very human tendency,

is to talk about what you are currently experiencing in terms of what you have long known. But what you have long known is another institution's culture, folkways, institutions, language. Your new colleagues don't want to hear about it.

They won't want to hear it, even if your mandate has been to bring change. Your new school may be desperately in need of fresh ideas; you may have been sought because of your experiences elsewhere; faculty may frequently ask for comparative data; you may have been selected as the ideal person to effect change. Even under, *especially* under, such a mandate, heed this counsel—use your new institution's language.

A new dean can grasp this imperative and still effect significant change, I think, by understanding that the faculty is indeed a living organism. A tree grows up from the existing trunk and depends upon its root structure. New branches and foliage develop off the old. So also for a school. Change, to be viable and permanent, must be part of the old stock—whether as natural new growth, the effect of heavy pruning, or as a major graft. To shift back from agricultural to cultural imagery, I would insist that a key to effective leadership is a self-conscious personal program to learn and rely on the school's own traditions, imagery, customs, names.

Such commitment to the new institution's culture by no means binds you to what *is*, to the *existing* programs, to the *current* organization. You would be amazed at how rich a treasure-trove of precedents and models for change can be uncovered from the institution's own past or from elsewhere in its life. Make a point of reviewing the files, studying faculty minutes, examining the school's and university's history /ies, reviewing present and past catalogs.<sup>3</sup> Then appeal to the school's prior curriculum or to the way another school within the university structures itself rather than to your prior experience. Envisioning change in terms of the institution's history or larger context is good strategy; it is also good policy; it makes you more a part of the new institution, more its genuine leader. Such an orientation to and claiming of the school's heritage makes your efforts, ideas, innovations, additions (to faculty or program) part of the heritage's unfolding.

Third, as dean you must love, honor, respect, take an interest in your new colleagues. That is an obvious item of counsel and easily embraced as another strategy for the transition period. Learning names, interests, competencies, responsibilities, spouses, and children inheres in getting control over the job. Don't take the position, however, if that attitude does not come naturally and cannot be sustained for the long haul. An academic dean must, I believe, genuinely care for, love, respect, and take interest in the faculty collectively and individually.

## To a Candidate for Academic Leadership

That attitude may require more intentionality, resolve, and commitment after the honeymoon, when the novelty has worn off, when salaries have been set several times, when conflict and controversy have punctuated the new deanship. It's one thing to love faculty when they embrace you as a new member of their ranks. It is quite another when one or a small cabal have wrecked a proposal that you have spent months in developing. Your respect will be sorely tested when a faculty member, noted for rhetoric about community and process, attempts to manipulate you for higher salary, reduced load, early sabbatical, a better office—perks that come at others' expense. You may not truly like all your new colleagues and surely you will have to watch one or more of them very carefully. Love them nonetheless.

Such caring, both private and public, with individuals and the faculty as a whole, builds the faculty's self-esteem. It plays a role in making the faculty the best it can be—as teachers, scholars, churchpersons, community citizens. And that is your job, to assist the faculty in being its best.

### **Between Two Cultures**

Fourth, faculty perceptions of your post notwithstanding you would want as dean to remain “faculty.” Teach, if at all possible. Try to keep up in your field. Do as much research and writing as you can. Attend your professional society meetings. Keep your standing in the guild, substantively and by appearance. This is by no means easy, as you will learn by talking with other academic deans. Few succeed in balancing faculty pursuits and administrative duties. But try nevertheless. And put extra efforts into making credible your faculty status at home. Identify especially with your own faculty. Have lunch and take coffee with them. Socialize with them. Make it difficult for them to think of you as “different.”

Establish your identity with the faculty publicly, particularly with the critical publics—students, administration, church, board, other schools of the university. I learned this the hard way. Early in my tenure I found myself in a small student-orientation session joking that faculty advisors go into hiding when they know students are coming. The statement had, unfortunately, some truth to it. It was a terrible and irresponsible joke to have made and it said as much about me as about the faculty. It implied that I, as academic dean, was different, not one of them, a person who looked on them as irresponsible employees. I resolved never to get a laugh at colleagues' expense again and to be more self-conscious about my status as faculty member and my role as faculty representative.

Fifth, live with integrity as both faculty and administration. This, too, is not easy. Duplicity, double-speak, inconsistency, game-playing, awkwardness come

with the job as constant temptations. You are both faculty leader and member of the administration. You must have the trust and respect of both your faculty colleagues and the person to whom you report (dean, president) and your administrative colleagues.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes one seems to come at the expense of another. Faculty members will bring you in on their conflict with the president (dean) inviting you to take that side. You may recognize the legitimacy in the faculty complaint. How will you respond? The administration will adopt a policy, with which you have some difficulty, but to which you reluctantly consent. The faculty takes great umbrage at both the policy and the procedure behind it. Will you curry faculty favor with a quiet campaign of dissociation and disavowal? You have real differences over matters critical to the well-being of the school with the president (dean) or with other members of the administrative team. How will you conduct that conflict? What grounds or criteria would warrant appeal to the faculty or to other publics in such a circumstance?

All the dilemmas of management from the middle apply, and also tensions that derive from the culture clash of ancient guild with professional organization. Such dilemmas and tensions take attitudinal form—faculty who distrust anything that the administration does and everybody in it, and other members of the administration who think of faculty as employees, and irresponsible employees at that. You have to live with those attitudinal clashes; you must work effectively with both parties. The dilemmas and tensions surface programmatically, painfully, and personally in all areas of academic administration, most acutely in evaluation, salary-setting, renewals, tenure, promotion, and now retirement. You will know things you cannot divulge. You will have to find ways of being honest, straight, dependable, but without volunteering information, opinions, or judgments that must be kept confidential.

Your effectiveness as academic dean depends, I believe, on the success that you have in living credibly betwixt and between faculty and administration. To undertake major initiatives, you must have the faculty (in the main) with you and also the president (dean), the rest of the administration, and any other consenting parties (university, church, board, etc.). I don't know a formula for living and working in this tension with integrity. Constant communication, openness, honesty, forthrightness seem essential. Also essential is the recognition that the trust relations with faculty and administration are never secured. They have to be continually renewed and renegotiated by words and actions. This working in the tension between faculty and administration can be a burden. It can and should be also the fascination, excitement, pleasure, reward of the job. You are the one who, by effectiveness in this mediation, makes the institution work. And because you are essential to this mediation, though you doubtless share it with others including especially the dean (president), the school needs and respects your leadership. You make things happen.

## To a Candidate for Academic Leadership

The mediatorial role—the living and working betwixt and between—that for the academic dean focuses on faculty and administration extends to all the stakeholders in the seminary or divinity school.<sup>5</sup> Others within the administration may take primary responsibility for the mediatorial efforts with other deans and schools in the university, with students, with staff, with alumni, with the network of churches and agencies in which students do field work, with governmental and fiscal bodies, with the businesses with which the school does “business,” with judicatory heads (bishops for us), with committees or commissions on ministry, with monitoring agencies in the church(es), with the board, with ATS, with prospective donors, with self-appointed critics. All these stakeholders do indeed have legitimate concern in how theological education is conducted. With any particular one of these, it may not be the academic dean’s responsibility to play a significant mediatorial role. Nevertheless, such mediation is intrinsic to seminary or divinity-school administration; it constitutes the larger task of which academic leadership is a part. Governance is highly complex and complicated, and much of the interest and satisfaction in academic leadership derives from balancing all the competing claims and interests.

Some comment about several of these stakeholders is in order and especially about those who constitute the seminary community, students, and staff. So sixth, do accord respect to students and staff. Much of what I have already said about relations with the faculty pertain here as well. Because you have already made the commitment to teaching, I don’t think I need to say all that much about relations with students. Obviously, a set of tensions similar to those with the faculty apply here also. The students are adults, committed to ministry, commissioned by the church, in seminary to learn, apparently prepared by experience and prior education. They also daily remind one of the human condition and the highly original character of sin. When you think you have seen it all, in comes your next appointment. You as academic dean deal with the case, typically exercising judgment on behalf of the faculty. You will have to work out the right balance of law and gospel for yourself, the school, the case at hand.

Treat the staff of the school, from custodians to fiscal officers, as you want to be treated, and you should be all right. They deserve such consideration but in places don’t receive it. Seminaries, like churches, frequently fail at personnel management. You may or may not have a major role in setting and exercising policy here, but you can play a part in establishing a tone for personnel relations. Divinity schools must be well managed. People need to be held accountable, carefully evaluated, rewarded accordingly, retained or dismissed using the best of current management and governmental regulations. But we are also a part of the church. Our treatment of personnel needs to reflect that ecclesial dimension as well. After all, the faculty are not the only ones who go into theological education out of a sense of call. The staff, including particularly the secretaries,



not infrequently, seek and labor in their positions in genuine exercises of vocation. They deserve to be treated as real members of the school's team.

Seventh, the school's relation to church(es) may be some other member of the administration's primary responsibility.<sup>6</sup> It belongs also to the role of academic dean, in several ways. The academic dean is pastor for the students, rector within the administration, prior to the faculty. He or she should take a part, if not the primary part, in the ritual and worship life of the school. The dean represents the church in the life of the school. The dean also represents the school in the life of the church. You need to be comfortable or to become comfortable with these dimensions of your role. Such responsibility increases rather than decreases when the academic deanship is exercised in a university context. There the pull toward a narrowly intellectual and university construal of theological education needs the dean's witness, encouragement, leadership and example for "churchpersonship." Even small things count. Make it a principle to be in chapel and not to let meetings or business fall at chapel time.

## **The Longer Haul**

If you do accept the position, and I would hope that you do, several other suggestions might be kept in mind, both for the exercise of the office and for mental filing for later use.

So, eighth, I have reserved to this point some comments about leadership style, though my philosophy that the faculty is the school's heart and soul should be evident in the preceding. I view academic leadership as very much a collegial, conversational, and consultative affair *and* the academic dean as well as the dean (president) as key to the vision, unity, direction, and vitality of the school. Collegiality and vision, in my judgment, go well together. An institution in which all its various members genuinely believe, which solicits ideas and opinions from everybody, where a high degree of trust prevails, and where the governance processes (in general) can be expected to reach wise decisions can, I have found, effectively sustain and renew itself. The administration is not the only source of ideas; though, because it has the charge, the resources, the information, and the time to think about institutional policies, it will generate more ideas and proposals than the faculty will want to hear. It may be tempting, given this advantage and how much you will want to do, to be impatient with committee processes and eager to push your ideas through. Trust the committees and the faculty. They have wisdom, hindsight, knowledge of colleagues, a sense of what the traffic will bear. The committee process tests out the viability of ideas and programs; it will also raise an immense variety of interesting new possibilities. Let it work, but come prepared to make it work.

## To a Candidate for Academic Leadership

Academic leadership not only generates and focuses those commitments and programs that constitute the school; it also must be *a*, if not *the*, primary mediator between the faculty and the school's several publics—students, alumni, the university, the church, theological education as a whole. Some, I know, would put less accent on process and focus more of the visioning role in the dean. Individuals and institutions will differ markedly on this point and certainly enough is being said about vision, discernment, the nature of theological inquiry, the challenges ahead of us, for you to find ample guidance.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, the academic dean will have a role in developing the school's vision and in enunciating it both within and without.

However he or she works to elicit and test ideas, the academic dean must play a decisive role in keeping the institution abreast of the developments in theological education, in religious studies, within the university as a whole, in the church and denominational constituencies of the school. Converse with colleagues in other institutions, attend to the literature on theological education, converse with other administrators in the university, keep in touch with the key denominational leadership, encourage your faculty to appropriate attention to educational theory and discussions.<sup>8</sup>

Volunteer to participate in ATS and regional accreditation processes. That proves a wonderful learning experience as well as a service. It provides peer schools the benefit of your experience but also allows you to learn from the school you visit and certainly prepares you for the self study and review which your school will undergo during your tenure.

Deans play perhaps their most critical institution-shaping roles in the selection, development, evaluation, and retirement of faculty. Here, too, personality, institutional culture, governance configurations, and administrative style will produce variation. But the dean must help the school to structure search processes that are themselves renewing experiences; to select wisely; to bring on new faculty on terms that accord with treatment of existing faculty; to coach the new faculty member fully; to set in place mentoring relationships; to structure annual review and evaluation sessions that are positive, formative, and candid; to lead the appropriate committees in reappointment and tenure reviews; to set in place evaluation processes also for those who are tenured; to assist faculty in planning for meaningful retirement; to lead the faculty in keeping retired members as participants in the life of the school.

In my own situation, development has not been a central concern. Grants for programs and support for faculty in seeking grants has. The dean does need to make sure that faculty, especially younger faculty, are alerted to funding possibilities, for their research and leaves.

Ninth, not all communication, especially with faculty, can be with good news about money. In notices and memos, I have found indirection, efforts at

humor, willingness to take responsibility and blame, and readiness to apologize to be important gestures or skills. These all help in communicating with faculty who, after years of practice, have developed the appearance of professorial forgetfulness and habits of selective reading and listening.

You may believe that because a memo comes from you, faculty will read it and respond to it. Wrong! Some will: immediately, before the print dries, before you are ready for the response. Others do so in their own good time. A few never respond. You naturally get peeved and resentful. You sent a wonderful memo. Why the dereliction? Here you need to put on your old faculty hat. Remember that before becoming dean you didn't have a secretary to keep your life in order; that you picked up memos along with reminders of overdue books, book catalogs, requests for references, reminders about submission of that article or chapter; and that you came into your office with a fist-full of mail only to have the phone ring. The important memo from the dean, the catalogs, and all the other mail dropped somewhere.

Amid such realities of faculty life, effective communication sometimes requires indirection, humor, and self-deprecation. I ask faculty every semester whether they need an exam to be scheduled for their classes. Some respond. Others do not. If I catch one in the hallway who I think should be giving an exam, a joke about exams or the suggestion that maybe we lost his response might get the information. If I have a number of nonrespondents, rather than call or harangue them as culprits (some of whom may not have needed to respond), I simply make up the exam list with the information at hand, send it only to the faculty and hold wider distribution for later. It is amazing how quickly that exam list identifies the faculty member whose exam has been omitted. The point here is not to suggest how to craft memos but rather to indicate that you might want to find a style of communication with faculty, one authentic for you, that takes account of faculty foibles and habits.

A little effort at humor also helps and works with students as well as faculty. Several years ago we changed one of our routine commands to students—Turn in cards with class schedules!—to a reminder that we needed the cards so that the switchboard could find them in case Publishers Clearing House called or their children had locked out the babysitter. We got the cards. Humor is one way of keeping your job enjoyable and of keeping a sense of perspective. That, too, is important.

## **Possession?**

Tenth, there comes a time when that sense of perspective flags, when you feel at home in the role, when you act with respect to the school and the faculty like a homeowner, when you perceive the academic program as your child. Take

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such feelings as warning signs! You really are not at home, you don't own the school, the program is not your child, you really are possessed. Remember your former colleagues' kidding. Deans come and go. The program belongs to the faculty. You are indeed the faculty's servant. When that feeling of ownership rises to the surface, you need: (a) a vacation, (b) renewal, (c) a new job, (d) exorcism.

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### ENDNOTES

1. I want to express appreciation to colleagues who have read and reacted to this paper, especially to Dean Dennis Campbell, Dr. Willie Jennings, and Dr. Mary Collins. The quirky views of this letter remain despite the sane counsel I have received.
2. Implicit in this statement is the recognition that this little essay reflects the academic cultures of the schools in which I have worked, as well as my own experience therein. I have sought to convey its personal and contextual character by making this a letter and hence a personal communication. But I want to underscore here that my remarks attempt to make sense of the institutions and institutional cultures which I know best, Duke and Drew universities.
3. On the university divinity school, its history, and its place in the ecology of American theological education, see Conrad Cherry, *Hurrying Toward Zion: University Divinity Schools and American Protestantism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
4. I will use president (dean) to designate the person to whom the academic dean reports in recognition of the different patterns in university and freestanding schools. In university contexts, the academic officer is often an associate dean reporting to the dean. In freestanding seminaries, the academic officer may be a dean or provost reporting to the president.
5. The term "stakeholder" is Robert Lynn's.
6. In my own situation, the dean plays the primary ecclesial role both within and outside the institution. Associate deans participate but in a secondary fashion. For a recent discussion of this dimension of the dean's role with particular regard to faculty development, see Samuel T. Logan Jr., "Faculty Development: An Organic Perspective," *Theological Education*, 31.2 (Spring 1995): 27-36.

7. See, for instance, Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in Church and University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) and *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); David H. Kelsey, *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993) and *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Decatur: Scholars Press, 1985); *An Invitation to Theological Study* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994); and George Schner, *Education for Ministry: Reform and Renewal in Theological Education* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1993).

8. Attend to issues in theological education particularly through *Theological Education*, the journal of The Association of Theological Schools, and *In Trust*, based at the Washington Theological Union; in the special reports and studies, like those from Auburn Theological Seminary, and from the events and conferences sponsored by ATS.



# Of Force Fields and Aspirations: Being an Academic Dean in the Nineteen-Nineties

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*Weston Jesuit School of Theology*

It was an afternoon in January 1991 when the president of our school knocked on my office door. When I welcomed him in, I somehow knew what this visit was about. We were looking for a new academic dean, the present office-holder having announced his resignation some months before. There was much discussion about whether his successor should be from the ranks of the faculty or from outside (the incumbent had come from a Jesuit university). It was expected that the new dean would be a Jesuit, although our statutes do not require that.

The president got right down to it: Would I be willing to be the new academic dean? I had returned to the ranks of full-time faculty for only two years, after a year's sabbatical which followed upon six years as religious superior or rector of the 130 Jesuits in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During that time I taught only part-time. The president knew I loved teaching but hoped that my experience of personnel administration would have opened me up to this new prospect.

To sweeten the deal, he said it could be for only three years (the statutes stipulate a four-year term). This past fall I began my fifth year!

I must confess that for many years I was not attracted to this position. From the time I joined the faculty in 1973, I had been asked occasionally if I would take the position, but it was always easy to say that I was not interested. The position seemed very managerial and "administrative"—a great distraction from teaching and writing.

This time I had a different perspective. After six years in a position of authority, the job looked different. Although the position of rector is not primarily an administrative position, it does have to do with relating to people in their deepest identity and ministerial activity. The principal form of accountability to the religious superior is called the "account of conscience." The man recounts to the superior the basic movements of his life with God in prayer, his relationships with other community members and others in his life, and the consolations and desolations he experiences in his studies and his concomitant ministry in the local church. The religious superior knows that the individual is also speaking regularly with a skilled spiritual director who is helping him notice and respond to God's action in his life and to integrate the various aspects

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of his life into his companionship with Christ on mission. This account keeps the relationship from being simply administrative.

My experience as religious superior gave me my first major perspective on leadership and authority, and the challenge and potential they offer. During the last years of my term of office as rector I was exposed to the ideas of Ronald Heifetz, a lecturer in public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.<sup>1</sup>

A year's sabbatical in London and Benin City, Nigeria, included an intensive weekend conference at the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations in London. Tavistock's group relations theory was a major influence on Heifetz and his work. One of the features of the Tavistock method is called "here and now." Participants are encouraged to notice and interpret what is going on in the present moment of the group's behavior in relation to the topic of the conference as it actually unfolds in real time. When I returned to Weston Jesuit as a teacher the following year, I changed my pedagogy in order to stress more learning in the present moment. Within the confines of the class meeting itself, students were invited to notice when aspects of the topic were being mirrored in the class process. (An example of this was the day in my Christology course when one of the students said that he wished we would get back to studying Jesus the great parable-teller instead of having the very uncomfortable experience of "sitting inside a parable," because of the dynamics that were going on in the class.)

Because of my growing interest in issues of leadership and authority, the president's invitation fell on a different kind of soil than would have been the case in previous years. As academic dean, I have tried to keep some focus on the theoretical and practical dimensions of authority and leadership.

### **Leadership and Authority**

I would like briefly to explain some elements of the theory of Ronald Heifetz I have been trying to work with over the past four years, because it provides an interpretive framework for exploring the role of academic dean. A basic distinction is made between technical work and adaptive problems.<sup>2</sup> Technical-problems work can be simple or very complex, but it does not call for significant change of values, attitudes, or behavior. For example, the doctors and nurses we view in the television program "ER" are engaged in technical work as they apply proven procedures to the mangled and hurting bodies which are brought to them by the emergency medical personnel. These procedures are immensely sophisticated, but the care givers are thoroughly trained in how to apply them to the patients lying before them. The academic dean's office handles technical work all the time, much of it work that is done every year: planning the annual orientation, regularly asking for information from the faculty regarding course



offerings for the following year, revising academic policies and regulations, developing the agenda of committees, and so on.

Adaptive problems are those that do not admit of a ready solution. Solving them calls for moving from a familiar paradigm into a new one. It requires new ways of framing questions and finding answers, and it involves trying to narrow the gap between the best aspirations of the organization and its day-to-day actuality. Adaptive work involves finding new ways of learning, not just learning new things. Adaptive work is demanded when the organization's context, the larger world within which it dwells, changes in major ways, and the organization must adapt to new, painful realities if its mission is to survive and thrive. Adaptive work addresses the gap between the mission of the organization and its actual performance, and calls for changes in attitudes, behavior, and values.

Adaptive work is usually a long-term effort, and its effects are not as readily noticeable as are those stemming from technical work. It frequently has to do with the long-term viability of the organization and with subtle shifts in the values and culture of the group, shifts which can help the organization survive amid external pressures and changes. To return to the medical field for a moment: While the procedures employed in "ER" are technical in nature, if a patient is diagnosed with a serious heart condition, the doctor would be remiss if she simply prescribed heart medicine for the patient. Such a procedure might be fully warranted, but it is insufficient. The patient needs to be helped to change his life-style as well, in order to contribute to his own well-being. This change calls on him to make choices, to take responsibility for them, and to be faithful to the required discipline they impose on his life. A situation such as this shows a mixture of technical and adaptive work. Doctors who try to ignore the adaptive challenges facing a patient and reduce their responses to simply the technical do a great disservice to the patient. (I shall discuss adaptive work at Weston Jesuit below.)

Technical work and adaptive work have very different effects on the organization's life. When done well and as the appropriate response to a situation, technical work increases the confidence of the group in its own competence. By contrast, adaptive work bites deeply into the psyche of the organization, causing anxiety, fear and a desire—at least unconscious—to avoid the adaptive work by routinizing the framing of the issues and the responses to them as much as possible. I am convinced that this fundamental distinction between technical work and adaptive work is important for understanding the appropriate functions of leadership and authority in differing situations.

If the distinction between technical and adaptive work is crucial to this perspective, so is the distinction between leadership and authority, notions which often mistakenly are treated as synonyms.<sup>3</sup> Leadership is the activity or

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set of activities which mobilizes a group to do its adaptive work. Leadership is here understood as an activity, not a person (a “leader”).

Authority is defined as “conferred power in exchange for service.” The power conferred can be as basic as the giving of one’s attention. Authority always exists in relation to expectations, official (formal) and unofficial (informal). Formal authorization comes through official appointment, a title, a job description, and the like. Informal authorization occurs through meeting expectations which are not official. It is never sufficient to meet only the official expectations of those who have conferred authorization; there are also other expectations that change as challenges facing the organization change. Again, the expectations of those in the organization who did not make the appointment need to be addressed as well. The academic dean, for example, needs to relate to faculty expectations as well as the president’s.

### **Exercising Leadership with Formal Authority**

It makes a difference whether one exercises leadership (i.e., mobilizes a group to do the needed adaptive work) from a position of formal or informal authority. There are particular opportunities and constraints involved in formal authority. One cannot ordinarily represent only one side of an issue, for example, unless done for tactical reasons.

During times of disequilibrium, when the group or organization does not know the direction it should take or perhaps even the way to frame the issues facing it, the exercise of formal authority will take the form of providing a “holding environment” for the group to do its work.<sup>4</sup> This holding of the group serves to contain—not eliminate—the anxiety of the group and provides boundaries, which represent a certain measure of safety for the group. The authority figure may well possess some elements of the answer, some ways of helpfully reframing the issues or pieces of the solution. In a truly new situation, however, it will be very unlikely that he or she will have “the answers.” The group may well have unconscious desires aimed in the direction of the authority figure for those answers, and that individual will need to keep returning the work back to the group which belongs to the group, even if it should resist this.

The functions of the formal authority figure are to represent the mission or purpose of the group, to provide boundaries vis-a-vis the external world, and to offer “enough” safety among the members of the group. In addition, formal authority helps the group identify and overcome its work avoidance, as well as identify the adaptive work and the technical work needed in service of the adaptive work. Finally, formal authority regulates the heat or pressure in the

group so that it does not overwhelm the members or become so moderate that the group can avoid the hard but necessary work.

## **Exercising Leadership with Informal Authority**

If the formal authority provides a holding environment for a group, containing its anxieties and offering “enough” safety, the exercising of leadership on the part of those who do not have formal authority is somewhat different. In times of adaptive work, those who have informal authority can be the instigators, the initiators, the heat-producers, the creative folks who test hypotheses, propose new frames of interpretation, come up with new questions and new answers.<sup>5</sup> They, too, can identify the various forms of work avoidance and invite the real work necessary to overcome the work avoidance; they can name aspects of the adaptive work and pieces of the routine work that can help that adaptation to new challenges. Those with informal authority can be the dissenting voices that point out overlooked pieces of the puzzle or uncover biases that prevent the group from moving into the new paradigm called for by the new situation in which the group finds itself.

## **The Challenges of Being Academic Dean**

One of the greatest challenges facing the dean is to distinguish technical, routine work from adaptive work. The energy of organizational life seems structured in such a way that routines, even sophisticated routines, can fill one’s time so that the necessary adaptive work does not get attention.

Every year our administration develops a list of administrative objectives for the coming academic year, and these are submitted for approval to the board of directors at its May meeting. Each objective has been assigned to one or more administrators according to the nature of the task involved. All these objectives are in the nature of technical work. Each is a problem that calls for a fairly well-defined solution. None of them is an instance of adaptive work.

When we simply create this kind of list each year, a more pressing issue remains unaddressed. Presumably these tasks are in service of the mission of the school, but that can be misleading. Is there major adaptive work called for by the institution, which cannot be listed as a problem or task or be addressed by a set of habitual operations? Such work may involve major unknowns, or a new way of imagining ourselves for our proximate or more remote future, perhaps a new way of aligning our activities with our ideals and mission. Adaptive work is anxiety-provoking, and for this reason it can get translated into technical work

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at the first opportunity unless we are very alert to the difference and are willing to live for a while with the unknown. Adaptive work needs time, patience, and the cooperation of a lot of people with varying perspectives. It is not incumbent on the dean alone to identify the adaptive work facing the faculty as a group of educators, much less to identify the adaptive work for the entire institution at any point in its history. But it is incumbent on the dean to be alert to the existence of the difference between technical and adaptive work and to invite the faculty to consider what its adaptive work is and to help it stay with its considerable challenge.

When I assess my own performance I am amazed at how much managerial tasks dominate. The centrifugal force of office management is enormous and yet, in a strange way, subtle. The forest of adaptive work gets lost among the trees of technical work. Becoming alert to the forest—to the need to assess whether adaptive work is called for and how it is to be identified—and then to strategize about ways to hold these truths up in front of the faculty challenge me as dean, and are at the center of the leadership at the dean's level.

This challenge found expression in my school when the faculty council decided this past year that it wanted to devote twenty minutes of each meeting to discussion of general educational issues. We had to admit to ourselves at the last meeting of the academic year that we did not do this once in the preceding nine months! Technical matters claimed time and attention.

### **Adaptive Work Facing Weston Jesuit School of Theology**

A major piece of adaptive work for us comes out of our recently formulated strategic plan, approved by our board of directors. We are committed to developing some form of cooperation with a larger educational institution. Such cooperation, it is hoped, will provide us with long-term financial stability (i.e., less reliance on the subsidy from the Jesuit Order) and increase the prospects of our recruiting younger scholars and teachers to form the next generation of our faculty. It is expected that we shall work out the concrete shape of this cooperation within three years and have it in effect in five years. This kind of venture involves much more than a technical fix. While we will insist that our mission and purpose must be strengthened and not weakened by this strategy, such cooperation calls for a somewhat new self-understanding on our part, a new "mentality," because such involvement with another institution will not simply connect us in some extrinsic way with another institution but will significantly change some of the ways we view ourselves and some of the things we do.

Interinstitutional cooperation is not something completely new to WJST. In addition to the ongoing links among the nine schools of the Boston Theological

Institute, the faculties of Andover Newton Theological School, Boston College's Department of Theology, and Weston Jesuit recently developed a joint graduate faculty that serves areas of specialization on the doctoral level. These areas will service the Ph.D. at Boston College, the D.Min. at Andover Newton, and the S.T.D. (the ecclesiastical doctorate) at our school. This cooperation grows out of a long-standing joint systematic theology doctorate offered by Andover Newton and Boston College and a recently inaugurated joint doctorate in moral theology offered by Weston Jesuit and Boston College.

Many are hopeful that this kind of ongoing cooperation among the three faculties in service of the students in the three doctoral programs will benefit students in the other programs of the three institutions, as collaborative teaching and planning become a normal state of affairs. Indeed, it is hoped that the technical and administrative agreements worked out among the three schools will, in the long run, mean some kind of deeper change among the three faculties, namely, the development of a culture of conversation and cooperation among us as educators, which could lead to a new era of ecumenical cooperation within the entire Boston Theological Institute.

But the road toward this joint faculty effort has not been an easy one. There have been numerous fears expressed that we would be putting too much energy into a very small degree program (our ecclesiastical Doctor of Sacred Theology program) and neglecting the Master of Divinity program. In addition, there is concern that we will be giving up some of our autonomy. Issues of trust were voiced. At one moment in the planning process most of the faculty of all three institutions gathered in a historic meeting to discuss the proposal. These people had not met since the founding of the Boston Theological Institute! Many past grievances were recalled, some strong anxieties voiced, and urgent voices in favor of moving ahead also claimed the group's attention.

One of the best moments for Weston Jesuit in the whole process occurred in one of our faculty council meetings last spring. One of the agenda items was approval of a proposal to form a Joint Graduate Faculty with Boston College and Andover Newton. An influential senior faculty member was kind enough to send me a memo before the meeting to inform me that the proposal as it was formulated made him very uncomfortable and that he probably would not vote for it. At the meeting, there were both positive and negative voices heard and it seemed as though the vote would be split, not a very good omen for "enhanced" relationship with the other two schools. Then the senior faculty member offered a revised formulation and asked whether I and a faculty member significant in the designing of the original proposal considered this a friendly amendment. The faculty member said no, I said yes. Then the senior member went up to the blackboard and wrote out his revision and, in no time, the process became the

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work of the whole faculty as they labored to come up with a formulation that would permit voluntary participation but would not appear as though the institution as such had formally ratified this arrangement, prior to review in three years. When the vote was taken, there was only one nay, with no abstentions.

I have to confess that I felt great satisfaction at the end of that meeting. The outcome was not my doing; it was the doing of the faculty. I held steady in the process and represented the need for us to come up with something that would represent where we really were but without setting back a very important process for Weston Jesuit's future. This became for me the authority-leadership stuff in action. It was not I as the great leader winning over people to my "vision" (a standard version of leadership), but the return of work to the people to whom it belonged. In this situation the informal authority of the senior faculty member brought creativity to the process and helped others to get beyond work avoidance to engage the hard conceptual work, despite fears and anxieties.

There are other dimensions of adaptive work at our school. Some of it is ongoing. The mixture of male religious studying for ordination and lay women preparing for ministry in the Roman Catholic Church has existed since the early seventies. But the general lack of certification for lay ministry in the church (a lack which is beginning to be addressed) and the exclusion of women from ordination can make the atmosphere at the school very charged, or abnormally "nice." While the school cannot make things different in some official way, it can be a place of conversation, difficult but necessary conversation across the divide of those who will be ordained and those who will not (and, in some cases, may wish to be, or wish that exclusion of women as such not exist). Administrators at the school, including myself, are challenged from time to time to help make these conversations possible, so that the various constituencies know what the others are thinking and feeling about this. In this respect, the school is being called to be a holding environment for the tensions, not the savior from them or the transformer of them. But the hard work of good, Christian conversation among the groups in the school is an aspect of adaptive work. It happens, often by the initiative of individual students. Recently, the two deans developed a forum for conversation involving faculty and students about the recent statements of Pope John Paul II and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith concerning the exclusion of women from ordination.

A third example of adaptive work is the paradigm crisis in contemporary theology and the role of the academic dean in encouraging faculty to offer their best efforts in negotiating these "white waters" of transition. Catholic theology has been engaged for some time now in moving from a classical paradigm to one shaped by a consciousness of history and pluralism. This transition is occurring

just at the time when some of the women and men coming to our school give evidence of not having grown up in an environment which gave them a strong foundation in their faith. The need for clarity on the part of some students and their legitimate desire to learn the tradition in its basics collide at times with the desire of the faculty to subject elements of the tradition with a hermeneutics of suspicion (as well as, one hopes, a hermeneutics of hospitality). The academic dean gets pulled by some students to call some faculty to task for the way the students perceive the faculty handling the tradition. The faculty, on the other hand, offer their own rationale for what they are doing. Most of the faculty cut their theological teeth on freshly minted Vatican II documents in the mid-sixties, and their perspective is shaped by the emancipation they experienced from that council. For some students, however, Vatican II happened in the distant past of history, and they have never known any emancipation, just a lot of experimentation and uncertainty. They would like something different from the faculty, not more of the same!

In this kind of situation, the academic dean has to remind the faculty that they are a generation apart from the students and cannot operate as though both groups are thinking within the same assumptions, while also reminding the students that, while theology at the present time has tremendous wisdom to offer, this is not an era of great synthesis. Students cannot be delivered from this time of transition but need to learn how to minister and theologize within its discipline.

### **Some Limitations in the Academic Dean's Position**

Some of the drawbacks of this position as academic dean are obvious ones. The administration is a twelve-month commitment and claims one's attention in a rather thoroughgoing way. There is less time for teaching and that can be a significant personal loss. Research is still possible, but finding time is an ongoing challenge. One of the most disappointing things for me is that I have much less contact with students. When I was a teacher or rector of the community I knew all the students with whom I worked very well. Now I have contact with those who take my courses and those who have academic requests or problems that cannot be dealt with by their faculty advisor or program director. This shift in level of contact creates a distance from students I count as loss.

The academic dean actually has minimal leverage with his or her faculty. There is a relationship of mutual dependence between dean and faculty, but very often the dependence seems strongly weighted in the direction of the dean on the faculty. There are not many sanctions available to a dean; the best instrument is that of persuasion. A faculty that is overwhelmingly made up of

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tenured individuals, who have been here for fifteen to twenty years (or more!), has a fairly definite way of proceeding. At times it feels as though I am uttering the words on a favorite t-shirt of mine: "I'm their leader, which way did they go?"

### Some Resources for the Work

It is my experience that you cannot be an academic dean without partners in the work. They need not be friends (of course, friends are necessary as well), but they need to be able to provide different perspectives that help the dean "get to the balcony" about what is going on on the "dance floor" of the school.

For me, a primary partner in the work has been the dean of students. There are only two deans in our school, and that fact, plus the actual personalities involved, has made it natural and necessary for us to work regularly together. You need someone, at times, to whom you can go and say: "You'll never believe what I experienced today!" or, "Can you help me strategize about this?" or just a sympathetic ear on a tough day. This is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

I work closely with the president as well, but in a somewhat different but significant way. To some degree, the academic dean and the dean of students are concerned with the "inside" of the institution, while the president is concerned with the "outside," with the school's relationships with other institutions, with donors, and with various governing boards. This is an oversimplification, but there is some truth to it. Communication with the president is frequent and deals with both routine issues and the unexpected crises that call for special solution.

Thirdly, I work with a key committee consisting of faculty and a student representative who give me wise counsel, who definitely give me alternative points of view at crucial times, and who strategize with me about how to present things to the faculty as a whole.

### The Vocation of Dean

I do have a sense that administration can be a ministry and a vocation. The founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius of Loyola, is a good model. After being a charismatic kind of figure during the first years after his conversion, he became a full-time administrator during the last twenty or so years of his life, living in Rome, begging for donations and then going to great lengths to intercede in high places for the donors, writing thousands of letters to Jesuits and others in the Old and New Worlds, in Asia and Africa, enduring terrible health, all the while being a *contemplativus in actione*, a contemplative in action. There's hope for the rest of us!



The issue of vocation raises the question of the God-connection of the academic dean and the faculty. If authority represents, in some signal way, the mission or purpose of the institution and that institution happens to be a school of theology, how ought that authority help the institution stay connected with God and Christ in the power of the Spirit in whose names the institution carries on its work? I'm not referring here to the formal liturgical life of the school but rather the spiritual life of the school and of the administrators and faculty in particular. Coming from a tradition that values spiritual direction, I am nagged by the question of whether an institution has a spiritual life. Does the Spirit direct it? Does its soul need ministering to? Should the dean be one of those ministers in this regard?

Many of our faculty and administrators have individual spiritual directors. But what would it mean to think of the faculty and staff as needing group spiritual direction? After all, these people pray and have spiritual lives. They talk *about* God and God's ways, about Jesus and the Spirit, about the church, the sacraments, and the spiritual life. Is there ongoing adaptive spiritual work that is called for on the part of the faculty?

Faculty members are very intelligent and critical. They tend not to work in groups with other faculty without a fair amount of defensiveness. They also know each other quite well, including individual quirks and peccadilloes. There is a shyness among them as a group regarding personal and spiritual matters which is understandable.

Yet the question persists. If secular institutions are seeking ways to recover a sense of the spiritual, how can a seminary or school of theology find its soul, grow in its spirituality, become explicit about its faith commitment in ways that can serve the purpose of the institution and model how an organization can overcome its institutional inertia regarding things spiritual?

When I agreed to become dean of my school, I had hoped that I might minister to the spiritual life of the faculty and thus of the school. It has not happened to any significant degree. Why not? Let me take a systems perspective on this fact rather than simply viewing this as personal failure. There are tremendous pressures on an administrator to stay within certain clearly defined parameters of the role. Even in an institution made up of people who, generally, are there because of a sense of call from God, there is an unconscious expectation not to get into things spiritual on an institutional level. The working assumption is that spirituality has to do with the personal and interpersonal realm. While it might be good and important for theologians to reflect and write about structural grace and structural sin, it is not the business of a theological faculty as a corporate reality to speak about their own experiences of God, of grace, sin, and God's good creation.

## Of Force Fields and Aspirations

It is helpful to me to see myself as dean navigating this expectation and being an object of its influence in powerful ways. Much more is involved here. At the same time, the office of dean provides some resources to further a faculty's development as a spiritually conscious corporate reality. Bringing in persons to address the spiritual life of organizations could be helpful. Recently, some faculty at my school have asked about the possibility of a spiritual retreat for those faculty who would like voluntarily to attend. This provides a precious opening.

I am clearer about the need I have personally to provide for my own spiritual life as I function as academic dean. I need, personally, to keep connected to purpose and not to let the many tasks flood me or fill me up. I get immense help from a daily discipline of centering prayer, from meeting every two weeks with three others for group spiritual direction, and from doing my end-of-the-day "examination of consciousness" in which I review the major movements within me, movements which have tended to connect me with God's action in the world, or tended to weaken that connection.

Being academic dean is not all tasks. At times there is great spiritual consolation in being dean such as those times when I am able to encourage a hardworking faculty member, to show understanding for a faculty member who is trying to write when it is very difficult to do so, and to suggest some options for a faculty member who needs some new pathways in his or her professional life. There is consolation when I can help a student develop a more humane schedule or show a student how better to use the resources of the school. Finally, there is consolation in stepping back at times and being able in all truth to say to yourself: "This *is* a really fine school, and it's great to be a part of it."

## Final Remarks

When I go to the balcony, as it were, and look at the role of academic dean in our school, one of the most striking things is that large portions of my time are devoted simply to keeping the school running in a day-to-day fashion. This is undramatic but true and important. "Someone has to do it" is a dimension of the job. If morale is basically good, if people sense that they are fairly well attended to, if the ordinary work is going on, that is no mean feat. Having said that, there is the constant need to be attuned to oneself and to the shifting situation of the faculty and school in general, to discern the adaptive work that is needed and the work avoidance mechanisms that inevitably come into play. God is in the details of ordinary, technical work and in the adaptive challenges facing the institution. "Showing up," being present and faithful to the organization,

particularly during times of transition, is not unimportant. Helping to provide a holding environment for the work of the school is not negligible. But trying to stay connected with God's desires for this institution is perhaps the central imperative for the academic dean and all others in a school that calls itself theological.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).
2. Ibid. 69-100.
3. Heifetz sees the three principal social functions of authority to be direction, protection, and order. These functions vary in what they provide the organization, depending on whether it is doing technical or adaptive work. See the table in Heifetz, 127.
4. Ibid. 104-113.
5. Heifetz, chapter 8, "Creative Deviance on the Frontline," 183-206.

## Of Force Fields and Aspirations

# Academic Administration as an Inner Journey

*Gordon T. Smith*

*Canadian Theological Seminary*

Shortly after assuming my current post, I was doing some reading as orientation to the job and came upon the study on executive leadership for theological education in a 1992 issue of *Theological Education*. It was all helpful reading, but a comment on the factors that make for effective academic leadership particularly impressed me. Of the various items mentioned, the author suggested that most decisive was the ability to handle adversity and that the only thing that effectively prepared a person to handle adversity was adversity!<sup>1</sup>

I first found the conclusion a little ironic and responded with a little gallows humour with a colleague or two, suggesting that if they wanted me to be effective, they had to make my life difficult! But on further reflection, I found the insight deeply encouraging. For it was and has been a continual reminder that though it is important that I bring certain strengths to this position—skills, training, expertise, and so on—it may be that what is most significant in the long term is my own journey. I can intentionally approach this position from the whole of my past, bringing a range of perspectives because of the nature of my own experience. It was a reminder that I fill this post as a whole person—with all that I am, not merely in the particular strengths or non-strengths that I bring or do not bring to the job. I come as a husband, father to two teenagers, friend, and member of a Christian community.

This has been the perspective from which I have sought to make sense of what it means to be a dean or chief academic officer. It has meant coming to terms with the unique challenge of the position, posed by the different elements of the job. It has also given me the freedom to see these elements from the perspective of the range of my life experiences, notably those that have shaped the deepest part of who I am. I know that I cannot be faithful within the organization where I work unless I am faithful to my soul. Further, I cannot be defined or reduced to the role of chief academic officer. In the end, the role does not define me, but I define the role out of whatever depth or richness I bring from my own life and journey.

## The Role of the Chief Academic Officer

Several years ago I read an article in *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality* on the ministry of administration.<sup>2</sup> At the time, I was like many or most academics, and viewed administration as, at best, a necessary evil. Administration was something to be held at a distance, trusted in only a limited sense of the term. Many in the academy did not view administration as an honorable calling, much less a real vocation like teaching and scholarship.

But in this essay on the ministry of administration I found a new perspective on administration that provided me with a much valued frame of reference. The author suggested two words that capture the role of an administrator: *compass* and *catalyst*. These words have helped me sustain the motivation to work in academic administration and have given focus to my vocational aspirations.

The image of the compass made sense to me as a metaphor for the vision aspect of the dean's role. It connoted the idea of helping the community maintain a sense of direction: "Who are we and where are we going?" The image is a helpful reminder that those in academic administration cannot be effective if they do not have some sense of the big picture—particularly of our values and our vision for the future. As a dean the ideal I strive to be is one who articulates both vision and values: what is important to us and what it is we want to be.

At the same time, the image of the compass is a reminder that ideally this vision and these values are not merely my own convictions or perspective on the future. A compass is an external standard or guide. Within seminaries true vision arises from the history, the heritage, the tradition of the institution, and from the interplay of that past with the potential of the future. The future is, moreover, not a dream or something one can arbitrarily import; it has to be consistent with the particular opportunities of the institution. Further, the faculty and our various constituencies hold certain values. I am part of that community and so will have opinions about our future and about the values that define our identity. But these cannot be imposed on the faculty or the board. The image of the compass reminds us of the need to listen well. Then, having listened to the past and to the faculty of the present and having examined the possibilities for the future, one's role is to be a constant reminder of who we are and where we want to go.

The image of the catalyst helps me to see another aspect of administration. First, it speaks of being an agent that helps an organization achieve its potential, fulfilling its mission with excellence. But secondly, it also speaks of service to one's colleagues, particularly the faculty. A dean is one whose purpose includes enabling others to achieve their potential, so that they thrive within the academic forum both in their teaching and their research.

The images of the compass and the catalyst have helped me come to terms with the different dimensions of the role of CAO—particularly those elements that are crucial to long term effectiveness.

### ***1. The Need for Strategic Focus and Initiative***

All administrators face divergent expectations. For the CAO, these come from president and board, from different ideals within the faculty, and from other constituencies. Further, the dean usually has a personal ideal or perspective on what should be done—and that alone is usually more than can be done in one full-time job. One thing is clear: one cannot do everything or please everyone or fulfill every possible good task.

This reality underscores the importance of choosing where one will concentrate one's energies. This is not merely a matter of time limitations but also of available emotional resources.

Strategic focus or initiative is not just a matter of doing one job at a time. We need to make purposeful choices. What can I leave aside for the moment? What, even if I were to tackle it, would make little difference? What changes would I like to see occur which simply are not possible now, for whatever reason? What can I do that will make a difference for the mission of the school and the well-being of the faculty?

When it comes to strategic importance, the CAO must have a clear sense of the priority of the faculty. They *are* the seminary. They are the greatest asset of the institution. And as a dean I am serving the mission and I am serving the students when I serve the faculty well.

Strategic focus and initiative also mean learning how to be effective within the limits of the organization. Regularly we will come up against constraints: limited funds, political constraints, the confines of the facilities at our disposal, and the current strengths (and limitations) of the faculty. A dean cannot work in terms of the ideal, only in terms of what is actually possible. Some things will have to wait, perhaps indefinitely. Humility demands that we accept these limitations; but humility also means that we focus our energies, with sober awareness of where we can make a difference, within the scope of those limitations.

### ***2. Attention to Organizational Culture***

There are few things so powerful in an institution as its organizational culture: the ethos of the faculty as a group, of the seminary as a whole, and the patterns of behaviour of the administration and its decision-making processes with the school's governing board.

## Academic Administration as an Inner Journey

Organizational culture either reinforces the professed values or continually undermines them. The internal ethos is one that is life affirming and arises out of the strengths of the faculty members, or it thwarts life and corporate strength. Every organization has a spirituality, which is part of that culture, and it either fosters or hinders spiritual vitality within the organization.

The difficulty comes in attempting to understand the culture, for it is so all-encompassing that one gets only bits and pieces of information or insight as one attempts to grasp what is the emotional energy that drives the seminary.

Many institutions have elements of organizational culture that are not helpful, most evident in the way that faculty view one another, in the way that faculty and administration consider one another, and in the way that faculty and sponsoring denomination(s) think of each other. Understanding these negative qualities is surely one of the greatest challenges facing a CAO if she or he is to be a catalyst for change.

Being an agent for the positive development of organizational culture is not easy. While satisfaction comes in affirming and nurturing the positive elements of the organizational culture, the tough part of the job is discerning the negative elements. In some cases the negatives are pathological elements that need to be confronted and resolved. In other circumstances it may merely be a matter of acknowledging that something is a problem. Often, in the very act of identifying something, the toxicity of a negative element is diminished.

And it is my observation that often it is just one person who can negatively influence the whole. One person can create an atmosphere that is negative and that poisons the corporate identity of the faculty and the institution. On the other hand, rarely can one person make an all-encompassing difference for the positive. That really must be a group resolve.

Finally, it is important to affirm that some negative elements of organizational culture are part of the very fabric of life in a fallen and broken world. They will never go away entirely, and my responsibility as a dean is to work conscious of the limitation but not catering to it.

### ***3. The Management of Personnel***

Part of the effective stewardship of the mission of the institution is care for the human resources, particularly the faculty. Yet few of us who come into academic administration have had opportunity to develop the appropriate competencies that correspond to personnel management. This includes programs of professional development, performance reviews and evaluations, effective recruitment and, where necessary, terminations. It also includes the range of legal matters, such as issues of sexual harassment for which we are hardly prepared.



Most of all, one has the challenge of recruiting well and then serving as a catalyst for the development of faculty, always with the goal that they will be more effective in their teaching and their research. By far the most difficult task is that of releasing a faculty member who simply cannot continue. This involves not only the careful assessment and decision of the dean but a whole range of political complications necessary in working with the president and communicating such an action to faculty, students, and other constituencies.

Whether it is with respect to strategic initiative, wrestling with matters of organizational culture, or caring for questions of personnel, the dean plays a pivotal role within the academy. Because of the challenge for deans to be a *compass* and a *catalyst*, we need to nurture the vocation of academic administration because effectiveness in this role can be crucial to the well-being of the seminary.

For some, this role in academic administration will be a lifetime career; for others it will be a role—something that they fulfill for a time, because of the unique needs of an institution. For some, to be a compass and a catalyst defines who they are. They resonate to these two images; they find in these words something that captures their identity and vocation. They are prepared to tackle personnel matters, budgets, and the frustrations that normally go with administration because of this broader sense of who they are. They will put up with a lot in order to be a compass and a catalyst.

But others who become deans know that they are primarily in theological education to teach and to do research and that these tasks are at the heart of who they are. They may recognize the importance of academic administration and they may see the need to take the post for a time, perhaps to accomplish a specific task from the office of the dean. It may be in an interim capacity. It may be for two to four years while the seminary works through a particular problem or phase of its life. Whatever the circumstances, being dean is not their long-term calling.

Knowing the difference is critical and is rooted in self-knowledge and in a knowledge of the institution in which one serves. For it could also be that one senses a call to academic administration but that within a particular institution, it is fulfilled only for a time.

This leads me to the conclusion that I cannot be an effective compass and catalyst where I work unless I intentionally fulfill my responsibilities as dean, unless I am clear about my call, clear about my identity and my strengths and non-strengths. Most of all, I am seeing that I cannot be effective unless I attend to the inner journey of academic administration.

## The Inner Journey

More and more I see that I cannot be effective unless I consider the inner aspect of this responsibility or office of the chief academic officer. I can outline the dimensions of the task or role of the dean and identify what I see to be the nature of the job, what the priorities probably should be, and what it means to fulfill the duties of the office in the face of competing demands. When I do so, it becomes clear that academic administration is also an inner journey. The responsibilities of those in academic leadership cannot be carried in a spiritual vacuum.

I need to develop the unique competencies that go with the position—skills in strategic planning, team building, personnel matters, finances and budgeting, curriculum development, and the various dimensions of academic management. There is the inner journey however that may be far more crucial to my long-term effectiveness. This involves my emotional development, my journey as a person of prayer, the integrity of my working relationships, and the quality of my intimate relationships.

We have been so prone to think of personal and professional development as two distinct tracts—both important and both necessary, yet distinct. My own journey has convinced me that personal development is a professional issue. I see a longing within higher education for women and men who are not only competent but have emotional maturity. There is a longing for people with moral integrity and character, but even that is not enough. There is a deep desire for people in academic administration who reflect a vital spirituality out of which they serve the institution and the faculty. We urgently need to come to our responsibilities as people who know how to examine our motives, who in the patterns of our lives have learned to develop a sense of humour, and who most of all have learned to live in vital connection with God, ourselves, and with Christian community.

There are various aspects of the CAO's role in which this spiritual vitality is most apparent.

### ***1. Relating to Organizational Culture***

When one faces the challenges of an institutional culture and the power that represents on the one hand, and the limitations of administrative structures and finances on the other, one has to attend to one's heart. When one is confronted with an institutional pathology or problem that seems intractable, and where the future will be defined either within or through those problems, then the only hope for survival is to come to terms with one's own limitations. The job requires that we grow in humility and radical dependence upon God.

In this I have been impressed by the perspectives of David Ramey, who in his work on leaders notes that when we assume the tasks and responsibilities of leadership we soon discover that the issues and problems we face are much bigger and more complex than our ability to solve them.<sup>3</sup> In the very disappointment and adversity we face, we discover not only the limits of our egos but also the inner strength to make a positive difference—to be a compass and a catalyst. Gaining this perspective is only possible if we have a vital spirituality.

## ***2. Relating to Strategic Focus and Action***

David Bosch, the South African theologian and missiologist, in his book, *Spirituality of the Road*, spoke of the two great temptations that face missionaries.<sup>4</sup> They are either prone to hectic business or to merely going through the motions. It is apparent to me that the same dangers apply to those in academic administration. The amount of work seems endless. Most deans put in long hours; and the temptation is to try being everything to everyone. Deans tend to define heroism in terms of the amounts of work they do and for the institutional problems—even the pathologies—that they can fix.

The other temptation is to feel overwhelmed by it all and merely go through the motions of managing the day-to-day matters that cross one's desk. And this is so easy to do by defining the faculty as those who have to take responsibility for the future, by positing ultimate responsibility on the president and the board of trustees, or describing oneself as merely a cog in the machinery.

To avoid the danger of frantic overactivity on the one hand, and of feeble attendance to the day-to-day affairs on the other, we must come to our work with a clear sense of who we are, what we are called to do within the institution, when and where we can make a difference, and how to be patient with the system. This clarity only comes from a well-defined and nurtured spiritual center. To achieve this there is no substitute for the regular practice of prayer and solitude, providing the time and space for reflection and contemplation. It is in solitude that our vocations are nurtured and clarified, and it is out of solitude that we gain clarity about what we are called to do in a given situation.

## ***3. Relating to Limitations***

We will not be able to work with peace unless we accept with grace and patience the limitations of our circumstances. Within my own spiritual tradition, it was a sign of spiritual ineptitude if one accepted limitations—financial or otherwise. One lacked faith or vision or both. Surely part of faith, however, is recognizing that, in the language of gestalt therapy, “you cannot push the river,” and that we have to accept some things as they are—at least for now. There are some things for which one has to wait. True faith means working with the

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realities of the present, contributing to a future that you yourself may not ultimately experience. This is only possible if we do our work out of a spiritual center. We need to know when we are caught in a deathly fatalism, and when we are genuinely in a position when we need to be patient with God.

### ***4. Relating to Personal Needs and Issues***

One of the things I have observed about administrators is that many of them accept positions out of a longing for personal affirmation. Their sense of self-worth is sustained by the affirmation of others, and in administration one is in a position that has a higher profile, and one can do things that others appreciate. It would be easy to do one's work primarily for the affirmation that one would receive, but clearly our sense of self-worth cannot be dependent on whether we please people in this job. This would inevitably lead to doing our work from a skewed perspective. We would be incapable of giving a negative evaluation of a person or even of bringing about a termination. We would do our work craving affirmation and fearing criticism.

We need affirmation, even praise. But we do not need inflated heads or a distorted sense of our own contribution or worth. We also need criticism—to make us more effective, to call us to account and, if nothing else, to keep us humble. If we crave praise and fear criticism, we will miss the value of both. We need to work out of a center of self-worth and self-acceptance. The only possibility of finding this peace, this inner confidence, is to do our work out of a spiritual center. It is only possible if we have a healthy range of affirming relationships, people who see us as more than a dean and who challenge us and encourage us in ways that do not allow us to tie our self-worth too closely with the ups and downs of our daily work in the dean's office.

### ***5. Relating to Power***

Every administrator wrestles with the question of power. I sometimes will jokingly remind people that the subtitle of the dean's office is "person of limited influence." But I do have power. I have a budget. My position does allow me to make critical decisions about personnel. The agenda of meetings is largely something that I design—whether in retreat settings, or in selecting guest speakers or in planning faculty business sessions. I know that I can make an idea work or sabotage something that the faculty wants.

How can one know that one is exercising power with grace, in a way that serves others? How can one be certain that one is truly committed to empowering others, and making choices out of a commitment to others and not out of fear? How can one know that one is not caught in a trap of using power for control rather than of enabling others to fulfill their potential?

Our only confidence of achieving this ideal is to do our work out of a spiritual center, maintained by both a regular pattern of prayer and solitude and by a healthy range of relationships wherein we are held accountable for our actions and reactions and for the fundamental values that motivate us.

## 6. *Judging our Effectiveness*

Finally, we need to know *when* we have accomplished what we are there to do. As noted earlier, some are called to be in one position in one institution in a career as dean. Others are called to be in a position for a limited time. Knowing the difference is critical. We need to learn the skill of judging our effectiveness and discerning our long-term potential in a position. And we need to develop the capacity to see what we are to do at a particular institution—listening well to our own hearts as well as to the comments of others. We need to develop spiritual candour and humility, and we must of necessity live in an intimacy with friends and potentially with a spiritual director such that others are in a position to challenge our motives, confront us when necessary, and give us wisdom when we are deciding whether we should continue or step down from a position. In other words, we need to know to the depth of our being that what we are doing is what God would have us do. We need to be certain that we are called to this institution at this time. Few things are so fundamental as this confidence.

I come to this role longing to be a compass and a catalyst. I know that I cannot fulfill this desire unless I freely accept that I bring the whole of who I am to the challenges and opportunities that confront one in this office. That is why the most critical thing I have learned is that a dean needs to be a person who is well aware of his/her spiritual journey and attends intentionally to matters of piety. In the language that is associated with Ignatian spirituality, we need to be contemplatives in action. We need to be women and men of prayer, with a well-developed practice of solitude. We need to be well-connected with community—both through the liturgy and the eucharist, but also in our intimacy with family and friends. It is in both solitude and community, in the interplay between them, that we can come to terms with our own identity, our vocation, the noise of our hearts, and the misguided longings for affirmation or power. We must find the peace out of which we must act if we are to act in truth.

More than that, to be effective we need to keep alive the bigger picture—the abiding vision and essential values of theological education. As one who works within a tradition that has a highly pragmatic and revivalistic orientation, I must keep alive the fires of hope and nurture the awareness of the redemptive power of education, the vital place of scholarship and learning in the kingdom work of God and the well-being of the church.

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I need to keep alive the deep inner sense that the mission of the seminary where I work and the vision of theological education in general are worth giving my life to. There is a strong and vital consensus within theological education that we can establish vibrant communities where scholarship happens that nurtures both heart and mind, where spiritual formation—the love of God and truth—informs scholarship, and where ministry arises out of emotional maturity and effective skills of discernment. This vision is worth working for. Significantly, there is a broad base of support within both the academy and the church, and particularly among theological educators, that this is the goal of theological education, and that it is achievable.

Finally, I need to nurture and keep alive the profound awareness of the value and potential of my colleagues whom I serve and of our students and the church whom we serve together. I need to keep alive the awareness of the goodness and grace of God, the hope that is found in the gospel and in the people I live and work with, and the truth before which we all ultimately bow.

I can only sustain the vision if I see that solitude and prayer, the nurturing of vital relationships with family and friends for encouragement and accountability, and the practice of worship and the eucharist are all part of my work. The inner journey is not incidental or even secondary; it may be the most crucial factor in my effectiveness.

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### ENDNOTES

1. D. Douglas McKenna and Jeffrey J. McHenry, "Principles for Developing Effective Leaders," *Theological Education*, 29, 1 (Autumn 1992): 85-115. "Although it is merely speculation at this point, we suspect that hardships may be the experiences which make the most critical contribution to leader development. Hardship may be the crucible which both produces and reveals depth of character in the leader." (99)
2. Charles J. Beirne, "Compass and Catalyst: An Essay on the Ministry of Administration," *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits*, 18, 2 (March 1986).
3. David A. Ramey, *Empowering Leaders* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1991), 213-218.
4. David J. Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road* (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1979), 20-24.

# Developing the Community of Scholars

## An Address to New Academic Deans in ATS Schools

*James L. Waits*

*The Association of Theological Schools*

A friend once described the position of dean in a theological school as the “P. T. Barnum of academia, ringmaster of the theological circus.” There are, of course, many images of the office of the dean: some laudatory, others not spoken in polite company. By now, however, you know that the office to which you have been called is highly purposive, yet surrounded by constraints; influential, but subject to institutional limitations. It is an office of diverse tasks and extraordinary expectations; a rich mix of relationships and a range of powers; an unending surfeit of requests, and always a shortage of resources.

Still, in my view, you have the best job in theological education, and when a theological community really works—and serves—you can be certain that a creative dean is at the center of it. The recent Study of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Schools, directed by Jeanne McLean, found a job satisfaction rating of eighty-nine percent among the academic administrators surveyed. That certainly confirms my own experience in the office of the dean.

Because I believe in the crucial personal influence of the dean in the formation of theological communities, I want to reflect on several dimensions of your role: the dean as mentor, visionary, facilitator, and employer. It is not expected that you will fulfill each of these roles equally well; yours is a complex office, calling upon a variety of talents and competencies, dependent upon a mixture of institutional resources, power, and traditions, that in the best deanships are delicately deployed. For that reason, I will also address the power, the voice, and the person of the dean. Institutional legitimation often contributes to the success of a dean, but *persona* is an important factor as well, as is, in some circumstances, sheer *luck*.

### **The Dean as Mentor**

The great privilege of the dean is to serve as a mentor of teachers—especially of bright, young scholars who are new members of the theological community. This role requires close relationships and the investment of time and interest, not remote and formal acquaintance. It means reading their publications, knowing their scholarship, encouraging their research. It means staying alive intellectu-

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ally, reserving time for your own scholarly research, being informed, and engaging young faculty in substantial conversation. Administrative decision-making can become seductive and all-consuming as you have the opportunity to “order” the community. But the intellectual task—the promotion of ideas, the shaping of others’ ideas—is the vocation of the dean. Be the kind of dean that scholars and teachers come to, for your mentoring will shape the community and give it vital intellectual and academic interest.

### **The Dean as Visionary**

I believe imagination is the key ingredient of the “good” theological school—not budgets, or course outlines, or faculty prerogatives. If you in your role as dean bring imagination and vision—the willingness to do things differently—so will others, and the school and the church will be the better for it. This does not mean that you do not have to be concrete—and even programmatic—but not too quickly, and not without considering alternatives.

Vision is in short supply in theological education—as is imagination. There is an aesthetic as well as a theology that underlies what we do, and the aesthetic can enliven an institution. In the most exciting schools, the dean is the keeper of the aesthetic consciousness, its stimulus and energizer.

Whether we are thinking of curriculum, or the ordering of disciplines, or student aid policies, the dean is in the enviable position of encouraging alternative views of the way things can be done, of being counter-cultural for the benefit of the institution and its mission. Important change seldom occurs in the theological school without the scrutiny of the dean, but more importantly, deans are in the position to be the architects of that change.

Robert Lynn has said that the modern theological school will simply not survive without a clear and confident sense of its vocation. While it may be true that the president is the chief articulator of that vision, it is the dean who enables that sense of institutional vocation and who constructs the consensus that empowers and implements it.

### **The Dean as Facilitator of Community**

Who is a more powerful influence on the nature and the quality of community than the dean? If there is no genuine community among the faculty, you can be certain it will not be reflected in the broader life of the institution. No cosmetic will hide the absence of generous respect and collegiality among the faculty, and you have the responsibility and the pastoral task of facilitating the conditions, the incentives, and the structures for that community to emerge. You will



facilitate the formation of that community by wise and creative intention—and by quite conscious pastoral awareness. You are at the center of that constructive task.

No one else will attend, so much as you, to a concern for integration, for the exciting interaction of specialists' learnings, and for probing questions of meaning and import. Few will attend, as you will, to matters of the significance of teaching and research for the practices of church life and mission—the truly *saving issues* of our research and teaching—and to the wisdom of our learning for human life and our planet earth.

It is in the office of the dean—no, in the service and vocation of the dean—that the motivation for community comes together.

## **The Dean as Employer**

The dean as employer leads us to the “real” issues of deanly administration. My other metaphors may seem, even to those of you in office for less than a year, idealistic and naive (though I would remind you that they are borne of my own years of experience that were unmistakably real). But the employer issues, too, are infused with matters of vocation and commitment, of understanding, of community, and many issues of plain administrative honesty and integrity.

For the future of theological education, I believe two employment issues are of foremost importance: the issues of quality and diversity.

We do not serve the church or theological education by employing or tolerating inferior and unproductive faculty. The church desperately needs—and we must supply—leaders who are formed and challenged by the best-informed scholars and teachers: not only those in the traditional biblical and theological fields, but those profoundly gifted and prepared in the practical arts.

The dean is the guardian and symbol of quality, because the institutional values you articulate and the procedures you institute for the recruitment, evaluation, and support of faculty will have resolute effect on the quality of life and scholarly reputation of your institution. Your vision and implementation of effective criteria for the work of the faculty will shape the life of the institution long after your deanship has concluded.

Think of your work as the manager of a highly talented and devoted workforce. (I do not choose the metaphor of “curator,” for that is far less active than I would describe your role. Musical conductor may be a better one, or “leader of the band.”) Yours is the responsibility of leading, coordinating, and facilitating the faculty's work at all stages—from recruitment to retirement. To be sure, your office may require professional distance and objectivity, but it is in your hands to create the constructive context, the ethos, in which the faculty's

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productive work occurs. Your commitment to quality and the instrumentation of expectations of effectiveness are indispensable to this role.

This means there is no greater watchfulness you exercise than over the selection of your faculty. The dean must be at the center of this process. There is no more important job you have to do than this, and you bring a larger perspective to the selection of faculty than perhaps anyone else does. And, if it is your prerogative, do not hesitate to make lonely choices, at times counter to the advice of the faculty. But not too often, and only on the grounds of quality and institutional and community “fit.”

You also have the responsibility to evaluate the faculty and to provide for structures and procedures of evaluation. (My best experience has been with evaluation systems that include a substantial investment in peer participation.) Your own style and institutional histories will guide you best in the shaping of such procedures. But the message for quality is: evaluate, evaluate often, with candor, and with the expectation of productivity at every stage of the faculty member’s career.

Finally, in your role as employer, I want to ask you to make a covenant with your other colleagues in theological education. We must expand the diversity and inclusiveness of our faculties and their teaching and research. We need to “broaden the text” of theological education. And we are not being very successful in bringing new racial and ethnic faculty into our theological communities. Though there are more women than ever before, we have yet to accommodate the experience and traditions of women and racial/ethnic persons into our teaching and disciplinary research.

I urge you, as new leaders in our theological communities, to join in addressing this situation with special intentionality, and we at ATS stand ready to assist you in this purpose.

### **The Power of the Dean**

I want to address, in conclusion, the power of the dean, the voice of the dean, and, finally, the person of the dean. Thinking clearly about each of these matters will enable you to fulfill your vocation and to accomplish the vision you have for your particular community of scholars.

I urge you to think consciously about the power of your office. The old saying “there is no one lower than a dean” is simply not true of those who think subtly about the character of the office. Of course, it is not the power to satisfy egos about which I speak. It is power for the sake of enablement; it is power as an ingredient of consensus; it is power for the formation of the community of scholars.

Much of the power of your office *is* personal: in your accessibility, in your capacity to foster dialogue, in the ways you find to forge consensus. And I urge you to be reflective about all of these. But the dean's power also lies in budgets and access to resources: in some cases, the power to determine salaries, the right to create committees and to make committee assignments; the allocation of workload; the scheduling of research leaves; and, if you want it, the power to assign office space. You shape the curriculum, you interpret the rules of the curriculum, you adjudicate conflict within the school. All are sources of power that rightly handled advance the purposes and mission of the institution.

It is the dean who exercises power without consciousness, or the dean who is in denial about the exercise of power that I worry about. So I urge you to think carefully about the power you command and the skill and integrity with which you use it.

## **The Voice of the Dean**

We desperately need in theological education today leaders who will give public voice to the importance of this enterprise and to the values our theological institutions affirm. This culture needs an informed religious presence, one which the theological community, along with others, can supply. That presence must not be limited to the civic club addresses your seminary presidents make; it must extend to the encouragement you give to faculty to communicate the results of their research to our communities, and the encouragement and example *you* give to faculty and others by your own public efforts to witness to the importance of the religious values that shape community life. The seminary has a significant responsibility, I believe, to organize itself to be a vital presence in the communities in which we live and in the larger society. Some institutions will do this through an investment in lay theological education, others through structured interaction with corporate and business leaders, others through seminary programs of community service. If such public voice and presence is to be realized, your office will be called upon to give leadership. Again, I urge you to give thought to ways in which the community of scholars—particularly theological scholars—may invest in such witness and service.

## **The Person of the Dean**

Obviously the theory of deanship I am describing is that of a strong dean, one who leads with vision, whose leadership is present and forceful. That style of deanship may be conducted in a variety of ways, drawing upon the unique talents and character that each of you bring to the office.

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But none of this can be accomplished without presence, without your own identity and passion invested deeply in the community and its direction. Who you are will influence the community you serve.

This means inevitably a kind of vulnerability: the willing expression, the passionate involvement of your person in the affairs and decisions of your office, an openness to investment in others, clarity about issues that mean most to you. It is that kind of immersion in the community of faith and scholarship that is your calling, and I welcome you to this new responsibility.

*James L. Waits was appointed executive director of The Association of Theological Schools in 1991. He served as dean of Candler School of Theology of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, for thirteen years. This essay is the text of an address he gave to academic deans of ATS member schools at an October 1995 ATS consultation for new deans in their first three years of office.*