Prioritizing responsibility as a new provost

As the incoming provost at the University of North Texas, Jennifer Cowley understood the value of establishing goals during the transition period. For three months prior to beginning the role, she spent time strategically thinking: "What is my team like? What is the culture I'm walking into? How do I prioritize who I'm going to meet with?"

In preparation, Cowley utilized internal and external resources to better understand the campus culture and grasp the faculty's operating principles. She requested briefs from deans, and accumulated reports from an internal research team which allowed her to identify essential processes that needed improvement.

It was an approach that hinged on transparency and a people-centric focus. In that interest, Cowley moved to partner with the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) during her first year. In doing so, she administered the Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey to more accurately identify and define the needs of the faculty.

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BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Cowley was committed to building connections with her team before she arrived on campus. Receiving briefs directly from deans allowed her to understand their priorities, as well as the styles of communication implemented by different segments of the institution. By actively introducing herself to members of the faculty, she gained their trust and respect.

"It set a positive impression with the team," Cowley said.

This set the tone for the changes she wanted–and needed–to make. Collecting Faculty Job Satisfaction data in her first year sent the message that, as provost, she is committed to creating a positive work environment for faculty at UNT.

PROMOTING DATA TRANSPARENCY

As Cowley began collecting data internally, she realized there was a lack of transparency in the university's systems for accessing and sharing important information. The campus was using an outdated, PDF-reliant system that made it difficult for administrators to obtain information that would help them work more effectively across departments and divisions.

In uncovering this shortcoming, she worked alongside her internal research team to roll out a new platform that provided deans and department heads the ability to easily extract the data they needed.

The outcome of this endeavor was overwhelmingly positive:

"In the first year we were able to roll out our data warehouse," Cowley stated. "Our deans, department chairs, associate deans, now have data that was previously not accessible."

Cowley chose to collaborate with COACHE because they could provide data that wasn't available internally. COACHE's easy-to-interpret Chief Academic Officer Report allowed her to share the survey results with colleagues and faculty. Ultimately, having this data also made the process of identifying any particular patterns easier–and allowed for the creation of appropriate action plans.

HAVING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

When reflecting on her first months as provost, Cowley stated that "most of what I learned was what additional questions I need to ask. Really shaping my understanding of the critical conversations I need to have in the first year."

To plan for the year ahead, she needed to effectively communicate with faculty. Critical conversations would help her prioritize the needs of the campus and understand if changes would even be feasible–let alone successful. On top of resources from her team, the data provided by COACHE's Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey helped to frame conversations about what improvements could be made going forward.

"It's great to be able to get the kind of detailed results we have," said Cowley of the Faculty Job Satisfaction data. "People have ideas of what they want to do, but we need to look at the data first. If we just go with what our gut tells us, that doesn't necessarily help us address the most critical issues on our campus."

MOVING FORWARD

Cowley understood the importance of preparing for her new role as provost, and her three-pronged approach ultimately helped her finish her first year with a plan for moving ahead and the capital to execute that plan.

Becoming familiar with her colleagues before the start of the academic year allowed her to better understand the campus culture and begin building relationships. Through these connections, and aided by internal and external data, she was able to identify key issues and, ultimately, provide the community with a clear picture of what was happening on campus. In doing so, she could better collaborate with her new colleagues by determining where they should direct their efforts to improve the faculty experience.

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Although Cowley was able to build connections early on with her new colleagues, the singularity of her role on campus does present the challenge of finding opportunities for professional growth and networking. "It's very challenging in the role to find the space for your own development, so I just work it into my schedule, just like any other set of meetings" advised Cowley. She also made time to attend COACHE's Partner Strategy Workshop in Cambridge, MA which allowed Cowley and her UNT colleagues to connect and collaborate with their counterparts from other institutions.

Partnering with COACHE helped Cowley grapple with the expectations of the campus. UNT plans to administer the Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey every three years to track their progress, reinforcing the administration's commitment to improving the academic workplace. After her first year, Cowley identified three key action items from the data and opened up discussions with her team to begin making improvements.

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UNT has also created a COACHE Priority Setting Task Force to analyze their current and future survey results and develop recommendations. Administrators and faculty on the task force are working together to maximize the impact of the data in advancing UNT as a collaborative, engaging place to work. In conjunction with annual studies from their own institutional research team, UNT is poised to measure the sustainability of their improvements and identify proper action plans as needed.

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