

Leading as a Dean

At one conference of academic leaders, after we addressed a group of academic deans about the barriers to interdisciplinary scholarship and changes needed to overcome them, a dean asked, "But what's a dean to do? We are seen as 'middle meddlers!'" He elaborated by saying that it is difficult to manage or effect change from the decanal vantage point because of the organizational hierarchy and power structure; there's a provost and president above him and senior, department chairs and tenured faculty in various departments around him.

Since that question was posed to us, we have met with academic administrators and learned about what deans can do to bring about improvements on any issue, whether it is promoting interdisciplinary scholarship and supporting such scholars for success, increasing the numbers, status, and success of women in STEM disciplines and of faculty of color, or creating a great place to work for faculty. We hope these suggestions will prove helpful for COACHE member institutions as they focus on the issues related to faculty recruitment, retention and development on their campuses as uncovered by our survey.

Focus attention.

Most issues have low salience for most people most of the time. In addition, there are always multiple concerns on college campuses and all too often the 'crisis de jour' can distract us from persistent, systemic problems. Deans can help focus the attention of faculty and other administrators by spending time, over time, on the issue upon which s/he wishes to influence.

Gather data together.

Deans are in a prime position to call attention to issues or problems by bringing data to bear on them. Research shows that what gets measured gets done. In some cases, the data are quantitative and in others, help will come in the form of stories and anecdotes (as in the "Improving Workplace" pages of this report). In any case, marshal the evidence to make the case.

Engage colleagues up, down, and across campus.

Build alliances with other deans by discussing areas of mutual concern, defining the problems, and thinking of possible solutions. Involve the faculty in those conversations. One administrator with whom we spoke said that he plans to form an Advisory Task Force of key senior faculty to figure out how to make progress recruiting and retaining scholars of color. Take the ideas to the provost; make your best case and make it known that you have support on multiple fronts. Offer solutions, not more problems.

Don't accept the status quo.

In other words, persist. Some decisions in academic institutions are made by accretion and just because one's proposal is rejected today doesn't mean that it won't be accepted later. Deans can persist until progress, even incremental, is made. An effective strategy is not only to anticipate the costs of policy implementation (e.g., modified duties, flextime, stop-the-clock, dual career hires), but also to discuss the cost of maintaining the status quo (e.g, oversized retention packages, FTE on search committees).



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Ask questions.

Instead of feeling the need to have all the answers all of the time, pose questions in a variety of forums where you already have people's attention. As one dean said to us, "I lead by asking relevant questions at a variety of tables with various constituencies. Most often, those questions have no easy answers, but I am able to put the issue effectively into play. Raising issues as questions puts academics in a mindset of problem solving. This is, after all, how we all approach our own scholarship - with questions, not with answers."

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