



What To Expect In Pursuing An Administrative Role: Lessons From A Decade In The Dean's Suite

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Introduction

I once had a colleague in the Dean's office that one day brought me a bottle of wine named Herding Cats. He said it was because from what he could see, that was my job as associate dean. On many days, he wasn't far off!

The path that leads academicians to administrative roles is as varied as the reasons faculty members will pursue or ultimately decline a move to an administrative role in higher education. After all, the path and reasons for entering the professorate are varied as well, so it stands to reason that taking a break from the pleasures of teaching and research would be hard to comprehend for many of us. While many take a turn on a rotational basis as department chair or running a committee, moving to an associate dean role can be an entirely different animal. While many ask why would anyone ever do that, those that do see there is a lot to learn, the challenges and opportunity to serve are great, and though often thankless, the need for good administrators is obviously critical as budgets are increasingly strained and a growing number of faculty, at least in business schools, are at or nearing their retirement window.

In this paper, I offer an in-depth look at what I consider to be the most important roles of a department chair. Additionally, I offer some observations and tips on what to expect or consider on the path to the Dean's suite as a department chair and associate dean, lessons learned, rewards from serving, and life after administration. This is not a scientific study by any stretch, but rather is largely based on personal experience and observation after serving in various administrative roles for nearly 15 years, over 10 of which were as associate dean. I was far from perfect in executing the advice herein. My focus is on administrative roles in business schools, but most experiences easily apply to most academic schools.

The Path to the Dean's Suite

The traditional path to an associate dean or dean position usually starts with serving as a department chair. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* has several articles on the subject, including interesting articles by Jenkins (2009), Munger (2010), and Lehfeltdt (2015). A search online will reveal other similar articles that provide insight from personal experiences. The themes are common, with each providing some insight into the role of the department chair along with a few suggestions. One common theme is to be as in-person (as opposed to relying on email) with faculty as possible and the importance of building trust.

McManis (2015) wrote in *B>Quest* about his experiences as department chair and the pathway it can provide to becoming a dean, vice president, or even president. McManis provides a thoughtful, balanced perspective about the pros and cons of some of the roles associated with being a department chair. He notes that most department chairs serve as long as their department believes they are promoting the faculty's interests, pointing out that many of the problems

that develop for a department chair tend to center around a single aggravated individual who seeks to garner support from colleagues. McManis notes the importance of addressing such situations quickly (2015, p. 3).

Lehfeldt (2015) offers a series of questions to ask yourself when considering taking on the department chair role. It's a useful exercise to go through these questions, ranging from considering why you want to be chair, to is it the right timing in your career, and thinking about what you will give up in the process of taking on the department chair role.

Munger (2010), offers a series of suggestions for new department chairs, most of which center around interpersonal dynamics. They are all on target and useful suggestions. In fact, Munger's 10 questions could be applied to any administrative role (with some minor modifications at the associate dean or higher level of administration).

Much of McManis's experience resonates with me, having experienced the rewards and challenges of serving as department chair. In many respects, I believe it is the most difficult of administrative roles. Jenkins (2009), Munger (2010), Lehfeldt (2015) allude to the difficulties as well as the rewards that can accompany the role. The department chair has limited authority, limited resources, and is often caught between being an advocate for his or her faculty and carrying the flag and implementing the policies of the dean and/or provost and president. Because these interests don't always align, a department chair can quickly find themselves in situations that will pit one interest against the other. Jenkins (2009) speaks to these competing interests and offers advice on where a new chair should focus.

The Department Chair Role

McManis (2015) addresses more specifically a few of the various tasks of a department chair with the primary roles being setting up the teaching schedule, dealing with students, running department meetings, and finding time for your own academic work. In addition to these roles, in many business schools today, department chairs are responsible for conducting annual faculty evaluations, contributing to assessment measures both for regional accreditations for the University as well as for AACSB (the main accrediting body for business schools), and conducting pre-tenure and tenure reviews of departmental faculty. These can all be points of potential conflict and stress between department chair and faculty, depending on the department chair's approach and the faculty themselves.

In my experience, there are a few things that are emotional trigger points for faculty, and they tend to be their teaching schedule and annual evaluation. While we all know intellectually that students must come first, nobody wants a lousy teaching schedule. While the department chair controls the schedule to a

point, there are external constraints. With limited time slots for classes due to competition with the other majors for the same space, it can be quite a juggling act to match preferences with capacity constraints. My recommended approach as a starting point is to ask faculty for their preferences, with the caveat of course that there is no guarantee you can accommodate everyone. Naturally, all classes need to be covered, but the better you can do with juggling course requests, days of the week, and times to align with preferences, the happier your faculty will be. McManis (2015, p. 4) notes this approach as well.

Most faculty members will appreciate the opportunity to provide their preferences and if at least some of the request can be met, most faculty members will understand if they don't get all of their requested schedule. When a faculty member can't be fully accommodated with their preferences, try to rotate the "inconvenience" across faculty across the semesters to minimize claims of favoritism. This is obviously more difficult the larger the number of faculty in a department and the particular requirements for teaching loads, times for classes to be taught, and other variations across business schools and universities. However, the extra time you take as a department chair trying to meet the needs of the students while considering the preferences of your faculty can make for a much happier faculty. Importantly, if you have to change a schedule already communicated to one of your faculty members, remember to let them know! Nobody likes surprises, and people make plans for research and other obligations far in advance around their teaching schedules. Perhaps most importantly, if you have a faculty member that is not your favorite, be sure to avoid the temptation to retaliate with a lousy schedule. If anything, while being fair to others, try to accommodate their preferences and hopefully it will enhance the collegiality between you.

Keep in mind that faculty will look at your teaching schedule relative to their own, too. Try to be balanced in what you are doling out to your faculty relative to your own teaching schedule to minimize complaints and maintain a productive and cordial daily environment with your faculty. And if you really hit constraints that provide major hurdles in meeting a faculty member's preferences, take the time to discuss it with them face to face. It takes more time than firing off an email, and you might encounter an initially angry colleague, but hopefully the face-to-face interaction will soften the news and you can reach an understanding and look at alternatives together. A hastily sent email is almost always an assurance that an agitated faculty member will soon show up in your doorway.

The other role of a department chair that can provide a lot of stress and conflict is the faculty annual evaluation process. While not every business school has department chairs conduct annual reviews, it is likely that the department chair will at least have some role in the process. Because annual reviews are typically correlated with annual raises, teaching loads, and are at least used as an indicator in tenure and promotion procedures, it is likely the most serious work

of the department chair for their faculty. It is important to take the time to know your faculty. This can be done in various ways be it in-person meetings, quarterly written updates, or by reviewing an annual report that faculty compile. Requirements for providing information to department chairs will vary across schools and institutions, but regardless of the requirement, taking the time to know what your faculty are engaged and interested in for their teaching, research, and service obligations can make your job not only easier, but more interesting. Faculty will appreciate you taking an interest in their work and will likely welcome the opportunity to share with you the great things they have done and are working on. It's also a great way for a department chair to spot potential problems their faculty are having, which is especially important for junior faculty, and the meetings can provide an opportunity for critical mentoring either by the department chair or a designated colleague.

Importantly, the faculty review process is your opportunity to be an advocate for your faculty to the college. If your college does not provide a framework for conducting evaluations, construct one yourself and talk to other department chairs to see what they do. Above all, it is critically important to be consistent and fair, as well as clearly communicating the process to your faculty if it is not an established or standardized process college-wide. If you participate in a college-wide process, you need to ensure that your 'grading' of your faculty is consistent with what the other departments do, especially if raise money is in a common pool and doled out according to the annual evaluations. If the process is confined to the department, you will need to ensure clear communication of the procedure you used in conducting evaluations.

Be thoughtful in the wording you choose and be encouraging where you can, even if you have to deliver less than good news. If possible, point out areas of strength to soften the blow. If you are not permitted to write much on the annual review (this became our practice over time), then provide the feedback verbally in person. Make sure that you take the time to personally deliver each faculty member's evaluation and discuss the evaluation with them. It might be best to schedule a meeting after the faculty members have an opportunity to review their evaluation, especially if there is some constructive criticism for professional development involved. Be sensitive and expect people to be upset. Even when you deliver good reviews, be prepared for questions and frustration—many people will expect a better review than what the evidence will suggest to you when you look at all of your faculty. If you are in a position where you determine raises, rather than the school having a prescribed method for determining raises, it will be even more important to be as transparent as possible. People need to understand how the raise amount is determined and that the procedure is being applied consistently across faculty. If you are in a public institution, salary data is available. Some faculty members will take the time to go look at salaries and try to track other people's raises relative to their own. You can greatly minimize appeals, grievances, and general headaches by

being as transparent about the process as allowed within your university and college's personnel policy guidelines.

The other roles of the department chair are duties that your faculty will probably care less about, but they will also be likely to notice if you don't perform your job with efficiency and established objectives in mind. When you become department chair, take the time to sit down with faculty one on one and as a group and see what their ideas are for the department. Munger (2010) provides several examples of ways to interact with faculty to promote your support for them, build trust, and learn about your faculty. Indeed, meetings both one on one and collectively will give you a good sense of what people might be worried about and can help you set a strategic direction for your department. People will appreciate the opportunity to provide input, especially if they haven't been asked for it before. It's a great way to start your administrative role and enhance the relationship with your colleagues. From there, set up a strategic plan for your department that faculty can review, refine, and ultimately support.

Keep in mind that few faculty like department meetings, and I don't know too many department chairs that enjoy them either. McManis (2015, pp. 5-6) seems to have the same sentiment. However, they are important as a means for accomplishing various things where you need to have the faculty together, ranging from assessment measures to recruiting of new faculty colleagues to discussing the strategic vision for the department and steps needed to move toward accomplishing departmental goals. Try to schedule meetings at a time that is convenient to most and provide as much advance notice of the meeting as possible, or, issue a tentative schedule for the semester if your college doesn't already provide a schedule. Have an agenda heading into each department meeting and circulate it in advance. Invite your colleagues to add items to the agenda if they have any. When it is time to meet, expect some deviations from your timeline, but keep the meeting on track and be mindful of people's time. You should strive to maintain control of the meeting flow and bring the faculty back to the agenda if conversation strays too far for very long. Faculty will appreciate your efficiency at running a meeting, sticking to the agenda, and finishing on time. We really are not much different from students! McManis (2015) aptly points out that it is acceptable and preferable to use email, rather than calling meetings constantly. Simple issues that are information items can often be pushed out to faculty over email. Faculty will appreciate you respecting their time.

If your role requires you to recruit students, be sure to try to involve your best teachers in the process to help you. If you are not as charismatic as they are, see if you can let them go in your stead, or at least take a more active role in the process as part of their own service obligation. Additionally, if you are to provide certain inputs to accreditation reports, see what help you can garner from your faculty to collect the needed data. You are likely going to have the broadest knowledge and so be in the best position to write the summary report, but others

can provide help along the way, particularly relative to their own accomplishments and involvements in various initiatives.

While juggling these myriad roles of the department chair, be assured you will be asked to serve on university committees and task forces along the way, too. These are good opportunities if you aspire to move to a higher administrative position, not only because it broadens your network of colleagues, but also, importantly, because it gives you insight and awareness of administrative roles and functions across other academic units on campus as well as at the university level. These committees should serve to broaden your thinking about administrative roles and responsibilities, and not simply be an added chore.

Opportunities to enhance and shape the academic major are also led by the department chair. Curriculum review and revision will be your responsibility be it for accreditation or simply because it's part of your strategic plan, or because it is long overdue. Engage the faculty in the process and expect it to take longer than you think it will. Faculty will have different ideas about what is best for the major depending on their own interests and academic leanings toward more theoretical or applied training. Be patient, gently lead; know the constraints and degrees of freedom for the major within the college and university framework. It would be helpful to have an academic advisor review any plans to ensure that all academic requirements are still being met with any curriculum change you propose. If the goal is to grow the major, be careful about adding courses that will become barriers for students or cause students to be weeded out. Be especially mindful of the resource implications of any change you propose. Who will staff the courses not only in the coming year or two, but also over time? If you intend to add courses outside of your department, be sure to consult with the impacted department on the front end! Designing requirements and then finding that students can't get the courses they need is a problem that is not easily resolved. Be sure you have all involved parties in agreement for offering the needed courses you are proposing.

Finally, don't forget to stay active and current with your own teaching and research portfolio. Good time management skills will be important. But, typically, there are ebbs and flows to the busyness of department chair life. Course scheduling and faculty annual reviews tend to be the two most time consuming, routine roles of the department chair, and they tend to both fall in close proximity to each other. That leaves time for other roles, including your own teaching and research agenda. If you aspire to become a dean or president some day, you will need evidence of continued research productivity as a department chair. And if you don't intend to continue on the administrative path, it is even more important to maintain a research agenda so that you can hit the ground running upon returning to a full time faculty role.

Other Administrative Assignments

In addition to the department chair role, other administrative positions can pave the way to the Dean's suite. Becoming an academic program director over a discipline-specific master's, MBA, or doctoral program can provide invaluable experience for curriculum development, managing students, and engaging faculty to want to teach in the program and coordinating their scheduling with their department chair. Depending on the type of program, the focus can vary greatly. MBA students, for example, are often an entirely different type of student with very different goals than a doctoral student. Be sure to understand the differences and ensure you have the appropriate faculty teaching in the various types of programs to deliver a first class experience for the students. Since these programs are typically more expensive than an undergraduate degree, and students are more savvy in their choices (and complaints), it is ever more important to address problems quickly. Students will talk and news travels fast, both good and bad. Your ability to be proactive will minimize the chatter and a problem resolved efficiently and effectively will be reassuring to students and the news will spread.

Running a program well on the administrative side can be as important as the academic content delivered. Students do not want extra headaches. Take steps to minimize them by doing the simple things like handling course registrations for them when possible. Provide students with a monthly newsletter that includes things such as relevant program information, upcoming dates and deadlines, alumni news and connections. All of these experiences can be helpful when continuing up the administrative ladder.

The Associate Dean Role

Unlike the availability of research addressing the role of the department chair, little has been written about the associate dean role. One exception is White (2013), who conducted a study by surveying 24 associate deans across Carnegie Research 1 universities. White's findings are consistent with my experience, noting that the role is challenging and stressful, yet it can be very satisfying professionally. Characteristics of successful associate deans, deans, and upper-level administrators include a strong work ethic, intelligence, strong communication skills, a good sense of humor, having patience, integrity, vision (especially for deans and higher level administrative positions), and being able to resolve conflicts. The majority of these attributes are mentioned by participants in White's study (2013).

It is flattering to be asked to become an associate dean or be hired into an associate dean position. As White (2013) notes, most associate dean positions are filled internally. In his study, all but one associate dean was an internal appointment. Most had been at their university on average for 20 years (White,

2013, p. 6). A dean or a committee thinks you have the know-how to manage people and programs at a higher level. You can be sure plenty of your colleagues will disagree. Rarely is support unanimous, so aspire to do your best every day to treat all of your colleagues with dignity and respect when interacting with them. Above all, operate with integrity and be fair. These things will go a long way to helping you sleep at night, especially after some inevitably long and stressful days. Be prepared for some long days, especially in your first year, when you will be learning by doing in many cases. White's (2013) study reinforces the on the job training aspect of the associate dean role, as well as the overwhelming and lonely feeling at times of having so much to get done in a timely manner with little to no help. He also notes the importance of being fair and how challenging it can be to manage perceptions of faculty in this regard (White 2013, pp. 13-14).

Depending on the size of your college or school, you might be the only administrator beside the dean at the C-level. That means you will be wearing a lot of hats, from oversight of academic programs to budget issues to accreditation to human resource issues to handling student, staff, and faculty complaints. It is critically important that you at least like the dean you will be working with as well as understanding and supporting the dean's vision. Otherwise, it will be a very difficult role. There will be information that only you and the dean can share. Having each other's confidence will be critical to success. Know, too, that not everyone will understand or be happy that you can't share all information about your decisions with them. Moreover, expect your friends to try to win favors from you in your higher role. You have to proactively manage expectations.

My life as an associate dean evolved from being the only associate dean to being one of three, then to serving in a chief operating officer capacity with one other associate dean. Being the sole associate dean in a large college can be incredibly difficult. Eventually too much will be going on for you to be able to be productive across the needs of the college with maintaining any type of reasonable work week. Even in times away from school, the email never stops. Being an associate dean is really very nearly a 24 x 7 role. Be sure to set boundaries and carve out some time for yourself. On paper that sounds easy to do, in reality it is incredibly difficult. As such, be sure you have a very understanding and supportive spouse if you are married and assume a senior administrative role. It will take over your life if you care about doing your job well. White (2013, p. 11) reinforces this with data from his study, noting that many participants in his study emphasized the importance of having a supportive spouse. It is also important when accepting the position that your professional expectations are realistic. Be sure that you and your dean are in agreement about research and teaching expectations. While you might like to maintain an active research agenda, you will find time slips away and it is very difficult to maintain a research agenda as associate dean. White's study supports this as well, with his participants noting that research time was greatly reduced or

absent. Similarly, many had given up teaching completely (White 2013, pp. 9-10). This was my experience. I simply did not have time to teach and eventually gave it up. Similarly, maintaining a research agenda was nearly impossible and eventually fell to the side as well. While you can have impact in these areas for your college, your own productivity is likely to suffer.

Understand from the start that your colleagues will not understand your role. Your friends and family probably won't either. To this end, White (2013 pp. 11-12) refers to participants' comments about isolation and even loneliness in the job. In essence, you have left your friends and peers and your daily interactions will be different.

You can describe in broad terms the role of the associate dean, but on a day-to-day basis, I often referred to it as a combination of being a glorified sanitation engineer and fire fighter. You clean up lots of messes, deal with other people's issues, put out fires, and do your best to help your college and its faculty, staff, and students shine. That takes a lot of time and effort to do well. There is no doubt that you and your dean will make decisions that will be unpopular and you will find that the day you had planned to work on something will vanish because you are dealing with backlash or some other problem that landed on your desk that day.

None of this sounds very positive so why do it? Well, someone has to, for starters, so why not you? Really, there are great aspects to being in a senior administrative role, even if you didn't plan that as your career path. You have a unique opportunity to learn and see how universities work and how the pieces fit together. You're working for a greater good than pursuing your own research and teaching agenda. To me, this always made the work worth doing, even on the worst days. It is an honor to serve one's colleagues and I viewed the role as doing what I could to make life easier for the rest of the college and free them to do the things they wanted to be doing in their work. Idealistic? Maybe. Important? Absolutely. To this end, White's study reveals a variety of dislikes expressed by his participants, ranging from salary negotiations to the lack of connection to the students to cleaning up messes created by someone else (2013, p. 14).

In the associate dean role, you are not impacting students on a daily basis in the same way you do in the classroom—and yes, I missed that—but you are still impacting students by hiring the right faculty and staff to support them, and by designing programs that meet their needs and help them fulfill their goals. Doing the job well should also free the dean from daily internal issues so that he or she can be out growing the resources of the college so that it continues to grow and thrive. You have unique opportunities to lead, manage, and add dimension to the strategy of the school and its constituents. It is an incredible opportunity and few people get it. That said, don't expect to win popularity contests and know when it's time to exit. If there is a change in deans, I firmly

believe in offering your resignation. The new dean might ask you to stay indefinitely or for a time of transition, but they should have the freedom to pick their own administration. Exit gracefully. Hopefully, you have plenty of accomplishment to point to for the college that you had a hand in, be it hiring terrific staff and faculty, adding or enhancing academic programs, helping with fundraising, expanding or renovating the physical space, leading your school through a successful accreditation process, expanding opportunities for students with new career initiatives and academic partnerships, and more. Just know it is a position where you need to be internally motivated, driven to do good for the sake of the school more than for yourself, and willing to dedicate enormous time and energy. It is typically a high-detail type of position, so if you are not a detail person, this might not be the role for you. At the end of the day, just remember, you are in a position of serving others. In doing well for them, you succeed for yourself in this role.

I was fortunate to work with a terrific dean. We had mutual respect and a high level of trust. We were often on the same page on issues and direction, but if we disagreed, it was important that I felt I could freely express my disagreement. If you don't have that working relationship with your dean, it is more difficult to be successful. Was it fun every day? Of course not. Budget cuts, layoffs, enrollment issues, upset faculty, staff and students (for various reasons)—none of these were fun. However, learning to navigate these issues was an incredible opportunity personally and professionally. Being an associate dean is more like a "regular" job in many ways than it is like being an academic. You are still in a campus environment but you're really running a business. Decisions made impact lives much more than a paper in an obscure journal or an exam given to students, and as such, great care and respect for the role should be taken. Don't expect people to say thank you. Very few will do so and most take your role for granted. It isn't necessarily because they don't care, but more because they don't understand or realize all the things that you do. When you're gone and someone else takes your position, they will likely understand. But it is the type of role that few pursue or undertake, and as such, few understand. It is not a position of glory but it can be incredibly rewarding and it is a critically important position to hold for anyone aspiring to a deanship.

Being an associate dean gives you insight into many of the issues and opportunities that a dean deals with, both good and bad. You get a front row seat and the unique opportunity to experience parts of the dean's role without all of the responsibility. It's the best opportunity to go into a deanship with eyes open, even though you probably still won't be able to anticipate everything that a dean faces.

While I would not say it is essential to be an associate dean before being a dean, or that it is essential to be a department chair before being a dean, they both certainly help and are a natural progression in administrative responsibility. Being a department chair provides a different experience of working with faculty

and helps to develop some managerial experience. Being an associate dean provides a myriad of experiences that fall under the purview of the dean. Having both experiences is certainly helpful to becoming a dean though some have managed to have successful deanships without all of the prior administrative positions. It can be done with the right combination of personality and talent. Above all else, communicate. Because of the many demands on your time and the number of people you are serving, email is a necessary vehicle for communication. Be sure to be mindful, though, that the most important issues still are best handled in person instead of over email.

My tenure as associate dean saw the launch of new programs and partnerships, expanded study abroad and career management opportunities for students, and spearheading two re-accreditation reviews with AACSB for our college. I particularly enjoyed campus-wide committees of associate deans so that I knew my counterparts and had the ability to reach out with a question to my colleagues. We borrowed each other's best practices to enhance policies in our own colleges. These were some exceptionally bright, dedicated people and I was quite fortunate to have the opportunity to work with them.

Conclusion: Life Stages and Academic Roles

You might think your stage in life prevents you from pursuing an administrative role. I was asked to be associate dean when I was six months pregnant! We made it work. In many ways, your schedule is more flexible since you are not tied to a particular teaching schedule, but your time is less your own and free time is scarce. There are definitely tradeoffs. I had a very non-traditional timing for assuming administrative roles, as I became department chair immediately on the heels of earning tenure. The biggest cost of this path is that I will probably never be a full professor. To that end, if that is a goal of yours, delay your entry into administration until after earning promotion to professor. And if you have a young family, ensure your spouse is understanding as well as your dean. Fortunately most things these days can be done remotely and so seldom was there an insurmountable conflict. Indeed, all but one of White's study participants noted that they did not regret assuming the associate dean role, with some planning to remain in administration until they retire and some planning to return to a faculty role (2013, pp. 18-19). Many noted the likelihood of pursuing a higher administrative post, such as a dean, provost, or president. It is likely that after some years in the associate dean position, headhunters will start to reach out to you for consideration for dean positions. Serving as associate dean is a great way to test the waters and see if a higher administrative role is your next career move.

For me, after spending nearly 15 years in administration and approaching the age of 50, I was ready for a break. As my dean prepared to retire and my child was entering the middle school years, it seemed an appropriate time to step aside and have more time for my family and my own interests. After a first-ever

sabbatical after over 20 years at my university, I returned to the department of economics and resumed a faculty role of teaching, research, and service. It has been great fun being back with the students and it's been nice to write again, though the time away has certainly changed the nature of the research I conduct now. I also continue to engage in some interesting service opportunities. The majority of my faculty colleagues were gracious and welcoming of my move back to the faculty. It was initially a bit awkward, but it has been wonderful to reconnect with students and have more family time.

Some days I sit back and wonder how I ever did it. The role of department chair can be a challenge, and being an associate dean in hindsight is rather daunting at times. But again, it is important and rewarding work! And even if they don't say it, the overwhelming majority of staff and faculty appreciate your work. If you have the desire and the ability to dedicate the time to serving your college, it is a very rewarding and interesting career path. It will likely lead to opportunities to pursue a deanship, should that be your desire, or it will help you decide that perhaps you've done as much administrative service as you desire at this point in your career.

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