

TEN TOUGH REALITIES OF ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATION

Accepting your first appointment as an academic administrator is an exciting time, but unless you are prepared for the realities of the position, it can be followed by one of the most disappointing periods of your career. The fact is, academic administration is a much different role than that of faculty, and as such it can be the best or the worst experience in a career. The deciding factors are most usually awareness, preparation, and attitude.



Although preparation and attitude may be the strongest determinants of administrative success, awareness is the key to preparation. After all, you must be aware in order to prepare. To make the first days/weeks/years more enjoyable and productive, this article is intended to provide some measure of awareness to future academic administrators so they may better prepare for the rigors of the position.

Nearly all academicians who make the transition between the classroom and the conference room have prepared themselves to deal with the rigors of curriculum, pedagogy, and faculty rules and regulations. They may even feel comfortable with accreditation, assessment, and appeals. There are aspects of the division/department chair or dean positions, however, that we simply don't experience as a faculty member. It's

these areas that are most apt to catch us off guard if no one shares them with us.

I recently asked several academic leaders, including division chairs and deans, which aspects of the job surprised them most when taking their first appointment as an academic administrator. The following is a summary of their responses along with some of my own experiences. I present them as the ten tough realities of academic administration.

1. A good portion of your decisions will not be of an academic nature.

As an academic administrator, you will be caught in a world between two forces: college bureaucracy and academia. College bureaucracy consists of those charged with the political, budgetary, physical, and managerial operation of the college. Academia, of course, consists of the faculty members and academic support staff who are charged with the growth and development of our students through teaching and learning, development, and advisement. Both sides are necessary to the college, and both sides will expect you to see things their way. The trouble is, many times both sides are often right. As one current division chair put it, "I discovered that many times there really are good reasons for some of the decisions that are made by administration. The hard part is getting everybody else to see those reasons."

2. Evaluation is tough.

In some fashion, almost all of the chairs and deans who replied to my survey said they were not prepared for the evaluation of their colleagues. I believe everyone recognizes that personnel evaluation is difficult and unpleasant, but until you sit across from someone and lead the planning, progress, and evaluation of his or her performance the true weight of the

process is not felt. It is not easy to tell someone that he or she needs to do a better job, but it is even tougher when that person was your equal last year.

3. You are not in control of your day.

As an administrator, your schedule is at the mercy of those around you. A wise administrator once told me that the only thing I could control in my day was what time I planned to show up. After that, it was out of my hands. Many other chairs and deans agree. In fact, one division chair told me that time management was the most important lesson she ever learned.

4. People will often surprise you.

And not necessarily in a good way. When you get to know someone as an equal, you only see what he or she projects outwardly. You don't always get to see their true nature or their effect on others. As a chair or dean, you become privy to student and faculty complaints, student evaluations, and the quality of your colleagues' work. As an equal, you don't care if a faculty member misses a deadline for attendance or grades, but as a supervisor it matters and may change your view of the individual.

5. You will have to confront your colleagues.

Many chairs are surprised by the number of complaints they receive of fellow faculty members from students or other faculty. The fact is, these complaints have been occurring, but until you are in an administrative role, you never know. As an administrator, you not only know about them, but you will be expected to do something about them. For this reason, a reality exists within this reality: You can be friendly with people, but you really can't be friends. It's hard to maintain friendships and to be fair, honest, and at times tough on those you supervise. As one chair put it, "It's really

good to have friends outside of the office. After a while, you won't have many left in the building . . ."

6. Someone will be upset with some aspect of nearly every decision you make.

It is often very surprising to see just how widespread an effect your decisions will have on a day-to-day basis. As a classroom instructor, we tend to think that each decision has one right answer, but we are only viewing those circumstances and outcomes from a singular perspective. As such, decisions can be based on emotion or feeling. As an administrator, you must view decisions from multiple perspectives and take a data-driven approach. One dean responded that the toughest part of her job was making decisions based on the realities of politics and budgetary considerations while serving the interests of faculty and student learning.

7. Few people will understand what you do.

This may not seem like a big deal, but all of us want to be understood and we all need someone with whom we can share our problems. As a faculty member, we have a multitude of like-minded professionals with similar responsibilities. Even our families can often relate to our daily duties. As an administrator, however, those opportunities are hard to find because access to a pool of peers is limited, your family will most likely not be able to relate to what you do, and there will be very little you can ethically discuss with anyone else.

8. You will now have to think in terms of documentation.

I never tell our college faculty that we are going in a new direction or taking some action because of accreditation. I firmly believe that when we do something it should be because it is the right thing or the

best thing to do. At the heart of it all, however, if you are not documenting these activities you will have no evidence of their existence; therefore, they must be documented for the purposes of accreditation. It is extremely difficult to enact practices that are both faculty-friendly and readily documentable. As an administrator, you must think of both, and you must work between the two groups (college administrators and faculty) that will only focus on one of the two.

9. Some days you will be more of a mediator than an administrator.

Conflict is inevitable when two or more people interact with each other over time, and it is no different in the postsecondary environment. One division chair responded, "I am not sure that foreign diplomats are any better mediators than collegiate division chairs." Conflict will occur on three basic levels for which you will be expected to mediate: faculty and student, faculty and faculty, and faculty and administration.

10. Communication is the key.

Nearly every success and failure in a chair or dean role depends on the quantity and quality of your communication. Much of the job will be dealing with personalities, relationships, conflict mediation, culture, politics, and change management. Policy and practice decisions can often be easy to make but hard to implement. It all boils down to how your faculty view these decisions and whether they see the benefits to their jobs and/or their students. Learning to manage the many egos and personalities in higher education is often essential to academic leadership success.

Conclusion

The roles of division/department chair, dean, and/or chief academic officer are some of the best and most important in

higher education, but it takes time to develop the skills needed for the job. As John Maxwell stated, "Leadership develops daily, not in a day." The keys to success as an academic leader, as with any leadership position, are to be process minded, fair and ethical, and to retain a focus on building strong relationships. As one dean put it, "Academic administration is a marathon, not a sprint. Anybody can do it for a short time, but you have to have the right mindset and approach to stick it out for the long haul."

*Article by Juston C. Pate, chief academic officer at
Maysville Community and Technical College.*