



## CHAPTER ONE

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# THE MAP AND THE CROSSWORD

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## Ways to Think about Being a Dean

“**I** have to see the dean!”

This sentence is uttered every day on every campus. Sometimes it is even true. More often, the correct statement would be “I want to see the dean” or even “I want to say something to the dean” (although I may not want the dean to say anything in reply). The dean constantly risks being idealized as the ultimate authority or sentimentalized as the source of all wisdom both academic and practical; that selfsame dean will also be glibly denounced as the cause of any distress and the source of all bad decisions.

Moreover, “I have to see the dean!” is voiced in a wonderful variety of inflections and emotions: from the elated faculty member bringing news of well-earned recognition, to the unbridled rage of another faculty member who feels slighted by a meager salary increase or a denied promotion; from the despairing student who has flunked out, to the bullying parent who cannot believe the college was so stupid as to deny admission to the smartest kid in town; from the nervous sophomore reporter for the campus paper who wants to interview the dean in hopes of a scandal or a scoop, to the state senator who just got wind of a course that sounds like a waste of taxpayers’ dollars—the week before the appropriations bill is to come up—and the athletic association adviser who hopes to find some way to work out the starting center’s inexplicable failing grade in calculus, and so on.

As this catalogue suggests, deans occupy an especially visible place in the academic world. Despite this perhaps unwonted prominence, however, deaning can bring much enjoyment, a widening of personal and professional horizons, and a whole new perspective on the workings of the academic world. Many say without hesitation that being dean is the most interesting and satisfying job they have had. They are called upon to be pseudoparents (and not just to students), colleagues, midlevel executives, intellectual leaders, strategic planners, politicians, counselors, and conflict resolution managers. And virtually all of it is on-the-job training.

Our purpose in this book is to reflect on the place of the dean in the academic cosmos and on the place of deaning in an academic career. What do deans do, and why should anyone consider doing it? What are the qualities of mind and temperament, of experience and outlook, that make deaning a plausible step in a career? More important, what constellation of abilities and ambitions, what achievements and closure, will make it enjoyable?

Two images capture the essence of a dean's job, one for the way the world fits together as seen from the dean's desk and the other for the kinds of activities that are conducted from behind that desk. The first is the map, and the second is the crossword puzzle.

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## The Map

Maps are so useful, so filled with information—and often so artfully rendered—that we may treat them with more deference than they deserve. In planning a trip we find destinations and routes by consulting the map, and on the road we rely on it where accuracy of information is critically important. We consult the atlas to learn or verify a single fact or to understand complex ideas and events, such as a war on the other side of the globe. Above all, we take for granted that the information a map provides is true, even or especially if it is a depiction of something that we would never be able to verify for ourselves.

In short, maps are usually viewed as factual accounts of some area or some topic. Although there is no reason to begin by assuming that what a map shows is inaccurate, there is equally no reason to think that it tells the whole story. All maps are artifacts of someone's priorities; the cartographer must select the area depicted, the features shown in that area, and the relative emphasis placed on types of information (natural features, highways, political boundaries, cities of varying size), and then lay them out and draw attention to specific details for particular purposes. This makes neither the cartographer devious nor the map

unreliable. It places the responsibility on the user to pick a map with relevant information and a suitable format.

Similarly, prudent deans are in constant need of reliable maps while exploring, traversing, developing, mining, or trying to transform the face of the college. They must consult all available maps before setting out on any of these activities and refer to the best sources of information for refining their position along the way. Where is the highway clear for speedy progress, and where is it washed out by the ravages of fiscal rescission or political storms? Where lurk dragons and trolls? What areas offer the best prospect for growing new crops and sustaining the enterprise? Where can resources for building new communities be found, and are these resources lying ready to hand? Are they already in use but subject to reassignment? Or must they be excavated at much toil and risk? The dean will want to gather information from all possible sources in order to build a detailed mental map of the college, but as with all maps, the information must be recognized as privileging certain themes or parties—in short, as partial in both senses.

But even as deans are travelers relying on maps prepared by others, they also change the terrain not only of the college itself but also of the adjoining territories with which the college has relationships on the rest of the campus and in the wider community. That is, deans must not only read and use maps but be makers of new maps. This requires three qualities: a keen eye for understanding the current lay of the land; the ability to see what previous cartographers have not seen, or at least not seen fit to record; and the steadiness of purpose to sell that new mental map to the college and the campus. The successful dean will not merely have programs and take action but will transform the landscape in the minds of its inhabitants—faculty, staff, and students. No dean can draw a new map in disregard of current facts or the advice of the longtime population of the region, but eventually the map will show new places of settlement and growth, new routes linking parts hitherto unconnected, newly discovered resources and features. Some will always have been there but gone unnoticed, others will be freshly created. Creating such a pathbreaking map is the hardest single project of any deanship—except for persuading others to start using it.

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## The Crossword Puzzle

This image developed out of the personal enjoyment one of us takes as a crossword puzzle enthusiast. For the enthusiast, scarcely a day goes by without at least one puzzle to amuse and frustrate. Moreover, something in that daily mental challenge corresponds to the way deans spend their days at work, and like the

crosswords in *The New York Times* the challenges grow steadily more challenging throughout the week. In fact, the correspondence may be greater even than the normal mystery-solving impulse of the academic (the favorite amusement of the scholar is the murder mystery, which permits harmless personal fantasies along with the pleasure of outwitting the author). But what makes crosswords so apt a metaphor for deaning? Several things do.

The most obvious feature of a crossword is its framework. Solving a puzzle requires working within constraints that are not of one's own design, and no solution, however ingenious, can run beyond the puzzle's border. A pity that one of the most highly prized skills in the academy is thinking outside the box! We are always thinking of inventive answers, and even inventive questions; the dean may hear a dozen stimulating ideas a week and wish to act on some or most of them. The constraints within which we work, whether fiscal, political, organizational, or intellectual, are not less real for being irksome, and they have the beneficial effect of keeping us focused on the problem (or the opportunity) as it is, not as we would like it to be.

Furthermore, even in the overall frame of the puzzle, the way is studded with limits and impediments; answers can be of only a prescribed size and run in a prescribed direction. If we consider an unworked crossword simply as a visual object, we are confronted with a positive and a negative image playing against each other. At first glance, we see the blocks more than the spaces; indeed, the design of the blocks can have an aesthetic appeal arising from its symmetry and its contrasts, rather like a quilt pattern waiting to be worked. It simultaneously tempts the puzzle solver with opportunity and limitation.

Like an Escher design, the puzzle contains two contrary patterns; seen one way, it is an invitation to participate in completing the pattern by supplying answers to the clues provided. As we fill in the spaces, our perception of the pattern shifts from a picture of lack and openness to one of resource and plenitude. As puzzle solver, we become one of the architects, or rather the authors, of the resulting work. From another perspective, we also experience the blocks themselves, the limitations on our inventiveness, as positive components of design, not merely as curtailments on the free rein of our answers. The ground of the puzzle is a fact in its own right, a reality to be not merely accepted but appreciated, lived in, and worked with. In just such a way, the grounding pattern of a college as the new dean encounters it will have a strong effect on his or her attitude toward possibilities, priorities, and relations with those who make up the local reality (or the details of the map, to revert to our previous image).

Although the job of a dean brings puzzle after puzzle, each must be solved by starting from the realities, the traditions, and the logical prospects of the college. A dean is never (well, hardly ever) given a blank slate to fill in at will—and

any dean should be very concerned about a college with so little sense of its own identity or resources that it presents neither pattern nor limit to the imagination and ambitions of the dean.

A crossword does not proceed on the basis of fully formed questions but with clues, teasing and enigmatic hints. The good news for the puzzler—better than the usual situation of a dean—is that these clues, properly interpreted, always yield the correct answer. The puzzle is not intrinsically unworkable nor is any clue a false datum. However, clues are frequently both obscure and misleading, built on bad puns or tricky definitions. These may not require any more specialized knowledge than would a straightforward clue, but they do call for a keen sense of the humorous possibilities in a statement and for flexibility to follow a sudden change in the subject one thought was under discussion.

It is equally true that an academic administrator, in working through the issues of the college and dealing with the wider campus context, is more often confronted by clues than by direct information or even clearly formulated questions. This situation is the result of two influences. First, the academy, for all its structural conservatism, is committed to the discovery and dissemination of new knowledge. It lives on a routine of discovering answers that are immediately treated as the next generation of questions. Thus the subject matter under consideration is constantly shifting before one's gaze, and the academic community's view of any given question shifts at the same rate. We may feel fortunate even to get clues that lead us toward a definable result.

The second reason is closely akin to the first: our work as academics is a kind of semantic and logical game, and this inevitably carries over into the way we talk. Academics take a frequently maddening pleasure in ambiguity, wit, and other forms of verbal play. As a result, discussions of new ideas, suggestions—and even strongly stated requests—sometimes seem more like a trail of bread crumbs than a well-formed loaf of bread to chew on!

Because the crossword is intended for a wide audience, its subject matter is correspondingly sweeping. The puzzle solver needs a broad range of general knowledge to make much headway or to derive much satisfaction, but because many topics reappear from puzzle to puzzle, we acquire a storehouse of facts and words that may never cross our path otherwise (who ever uses “anoa” outside the world of puzzles?) but are a part of our working vocabulary in this setting.

In the American style of crossword, all answers are fully interlocking. This means that every entry not only must be correct but also will contribute to constructing—or distorting—the answers to several other intersecting questions. Every dean knows the painful applicability of this comparison. Most frequent are the allocation choices: Should the expansion line go to Spanish or mathematics?

Should the precious open office be kept for faculty use, assigned to TAs in English to tutor hundreds of undergraduates in their discussion sections, or converted into a computer lab where graduate students in history, political science, and sociology can do their research?

In each case, progress for one unit may mean stasis, or even retrenchment, for the others, but such a shift of resources may allow judicious adjustments to the size or focus of a unit that has grown beyond its sustainable dimensions, and that is progress too. In fact, the decision may well have a greater impact on the unit that does *not* get resources than on the unit that does.

More appealing is the challenge of advancing more than one ambition with the same decision—supplying letters for words in both directions, as it were. Faculty appointments that link a stronger department with a less mature one can give both of them a new capacity and a shared sense of engagement in new activities; support for academic programs that cross disciplinary boundaries, physical facilities that benefit several units, and scholarship funds that help both underrepresented student groups and undersubscribed programs are other good illustrations of the process.

And finally, whatever success or failure with the current puzzle, tomorrow morning will bring a whole new puzzle, with its own design, constraints, clues, and answers. Experience steadily builds both a knowledge base and adeptness at interpreting the clues. Just as the Sunday puzzle has a hidden theme or gimmick, so there are unspoken themes, nuances, and familiar topics on the job.

Still, there is at least one crucial difference between the crossword puzzle and the dean's job: the puzzle comes preconstructed. Each clue can have only one answer, and that answer is known—to the puzzle maker, but not to you—before you ever consider the first clue. It is a very good thing that deaning departs from puzzle solving in this respect. Instead of hoping to catch up with a predetermined course of action, deans have the freedom to devise solutions as numerous and as creative as the constraints of resources, institutional policy, and political reality will permit, and choose among them. In this way, they get to be puzzle maker as well as solver!

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## Deaning as Part of an Ongoing Academic Career

A glance around the room at a gathering of deans, or any extended conversation in such a group, will suggest that deans fall into three broad groups, reflecting the needs of their particular college, their motivation and attitude upon entering the job, and their career plans as the job progresses.

## The Faculty Citizen-Dean

A very traditional view of the deanship, now mostly seen in smaller liberal arts colleges, is that it should be a short-term engagement, not intended to last more than four years. Most faculty who become deans in this context would not think of moving to another institution simply to be a dean; it is a role that a senior faculty member takes on at home, an act of *noblesse oblige*.

In this model, the dean is on loan from his or her department, a role akin to that of an ambassador to a small and placid island republic. Everyone understands from the beginning that the ambassador will go back to the department and resume the full-time life of teaching and scholarship that made him or her an appropriate choice to become dean in the first place. Such a dean is almost invariably a well-respected scholar and a model academic citizen. The record may include service as chair of a major department or leadership in faculty self-governance, but the appointment as dean is not primarily in recognition of administrative adeptness. Instead, it is a simple statement of confidence in a senior colleague who understands the place and its people, and can be relied on to do The Right Thing.

This is the quintessential faculty member-dean. During this time away from normal faculty service, the incumbent tries not to weaken any significant tie to the academic world to which he or she is accustomed but rather to carry the experience and habits of a skilled academic, undiluted, into a new role, and work from the same premises, priorities, and (as far as possible) procedures as before.

## The Corporate Dean

This approach is (very loosely) based on notions of corporate management that have swept through academic administration at an accelerating pace in the past two decades. Faculty usually would not endorse, much less adopt, the corporate management mentality for the academy; indeed, the two worlds seem starkly antithetical to most faculty.

The impetus for a corporate approach comes rather from the senior leaders of campus administration who are keenly aware of the need for competent, prudent administrators to lead the component parts of the enterprise. As presidents have been cast more often in the role of corporate executives (reflecting the personal habits and preferences of the trustees, transmogrified by the aspirations and anxieties of the university), so the view of the academy as a business first and an intellectual beehive second has become normative for virtually all research universities and for most others as well.

This style of managing the academy entails a different view of how the institution is structured, of the roles that various groups should play, and of the basis on which decisions are made. A faculty member who becomes a dean in this setting is more likely—eventually if not at the outset—to see academic issues as defined by resources and policies, leading to solutions and actions that are cast in quantitative terms, rather than starting from the familiar faculty perspective of programs, colleagues, external stimuli, and local ambitions, and casting outcomes in terms of values.

This is not to suggest that one approach is inherently better than the other; however, they will look very different and have different value to the two populations with which the dean must deal: the faculty and the campus administration. Of course, where resources are scarce and ideas plentiful—that is, in nearly every college—careful stewardship and planning are essential, and all deans will be conscious of fiscal constraints and tantalizing opportunities. The difference will be one of emphasis, presentation, and justification.

Of more personal significance, this style of deaning will put the college and its operations in a new light; indeed, serving as a dean in a “corporate” setting is likely to create a permanent change in one’s view of the university as an institution and even of one’s priorities for an academic career. Returning to a full-time role as scholar-teacher may bring a strong sense of relief or a lingering sense of regret, but the view of the campus will never be the same.

### **The Accidental Tourist-Dean**

This is the most common model. Faculty who have had extensive and at least sporadically satisfying experience with departmental administration or faculty governance see deanship as a logical next step. They realize that the role of dean is not a simple extension of the normal faculty routine but rather one that builds on the administrative world glimpsed from the department chair’s desk. Accordingly, the new dean expects a new distribution of time and effort (little or no regular teaching, for example) but may expect no big surprises in the administrative content of the job. Usually, the new accidental tourist-dean plunges into the world of administration with little or no systematic preparation and swiftly discovers how high the stack of obligations really is, how unforgiving the calendar, and how varied the range of activities.

The nearly inevitable result is a dramatic attenuation of the activities at the core of the faculty member’s life—teaching, ongoing research, regular involvement in disciplinary organizations and meetings, supervision of graduate students. There is no conscious intent to make a break with one’s familiar life as a faculty member, but there is also no definite timetable or resolve to return to the

status quo ante. The unwary dean may quickly wonder whether there has been a ghastly mistake. It is extremely important to come to grips with the realities of the transition and become comfortable with the nature of the new job.

The central feature of each of these models is the degree to which one sees deaning both as an academic role and as something different from a slightly recast faculty role. Different institutions will have expectations that will determine to a great extent what kind of dean will succeed, or even get appointed. Anyone hoping to become a dean needs to be conscious of these expectations, deliberate in accepting the model, and comfortable in what it will require. If a corporate dean ends up at an institution that wants a faculty member who will keep up a fair amount of teaching, vigorous research, and strong ties to the disciplinary department, that dean is likely to have a short and frustrating career as a dean. A scholar who cannot tolerate a reduction in research time yet is called on to spend 40 percent of the week in external development efforts will leave the deanship on a sour note, with a damaging hole in the part of his or her career that matters most.

But if there is a good fit between what an institution wants in its dean and the individual's own long-term values for a career in the academy—not just for the next few years or for the past few—then deaning can be the most interesting job on campus. The following chapters will explore facets of that job, from the decision to try for a deanship through the decision to leave it behind—or, at least, other—pursuits.

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## Suggestions for Further Reading

- Axtell, James. *The Pleasures of Academe*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.
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- Tucker, Allan, and Robert Bryan. *The Academic Dean: Dove, Dragon, and Diplomat* (2nd ed.). Phoenix: American Council on Education/Oryx Press, 1999.