PART ONE

BECOMING A DEAN
July 1, 2012. Charles Sessions approached his office and inwardly smiled. There was
his name on the door: Dean Sessions. He could not help but feel some pride as he
opened the door, set down his briefcase, and sat in the executive chair behind a beau-
tiful desk, complete with a new computer, tablet, and smartphone. The moment did
not last long. Dean Sessions felt a sinking feeling rapidly replacing the pride of a few
moments ago when he noticed the piles of folders left by his predecessor. As his assis-
tant knocked on the door and said, “The president would like to see you in five minutes,
and you have an appointment with the dean of students at 9:30,” Dean Sessions had
just one thought. “What have I gotten myself into?”

The feeling of being overwhelmed as a new dean is quite common. Because most deans
start as faculty, very few deans have had formal leadership training. Instead, deans
have risen through the ranks, all the while engaging in campus service and leadership,
such as chairing committees, or directing departments, programs, or special centers
on their campuses. Because they have knowledge of the institution, and the respect of
the faculty, often these faculty leaders are tapped to serve as assistant or associate
deans, giving them some chance to learn by watching their deans. However, there is
not a “dean’s school” for aspiring deans, and many deans learn their roles and responsi-
obilities as they begin their jobs. The learning curve can be especially steep if the dean
has moved to a new institution.

The roles of deans vary considerably from one institution to another, but
there are similarities. In small colleges, the dean is usually the chief academic
officer and may also have the title of vice president for academic affairs or
provost. In larger universities, the dean is the head of a college and, along with the deans of other colleges, reports to the provost. Regardless of their scope of responsibilities and their type of institution, people who serve as senior academic leaders at the dean, provost, or associate or assistant levels, will encounter similar scenarios, challenges, and opportunities.

Metaphorically, deans work between a rock and a hard place, and the best way to move in that tight space is to realize that good relationships are essential for success. On the one hand, deans are champions for the academic division, especially for the faculty. On the other hand, they are administrative officers and must keep the best interests of the college in mind. These positions inevitably come into conflict. For example, the faculty may want larger departmental budgets, and there may be good reasons for increases. However, the college or university may not have the financial resources necessary to increase the budgets of some or all departments. What should be the highest priority? Should all departments be treated the same? Can the dean try to get additional funds? Any decision is likely to be met with criticism from one corner or another. Therefore, decisions about all matters need to be presented clearly so that faculty members can understand the rationale, even if they do not agree with the outcome. Even then, there is no escaping the position between the rock and the hard place.

Deans are first and foremost academic leaders working with faculty members to shape the curriculum and provide educational opportunities that are consistent with the college’s mission and values. The dean needs to articulate an overarching vision while refraining from simply imposing this vision on the faculty. Along with the college or university mission and strategic plan, the vision should guide decisions about curricular changes, hiring of faculty and staff, and budgeting. There is a natural tension between serving as an academic leader and participating in shared governance. The faculty are responsible for most curricular decisions, and the dean must lead, often from behind. To walk between this rock and a hard place, a dean must be an excellent communicator.

The quality and timing of one’s oral and written communication skills can lead to success or sink a dean’s career. Seemingly small mistakes, such as typographical errors, can be interpreted as sloppiness or a lack of caring. Faculty members want to read high-quality academic prose, but vice presidents and staff members often prefer clear, brief messages. The faculty and staff want as much transparency as possible. Although some issues are necessarily confidential, openness helps to build trust and effective working relationships. How things are said is often as important as what is said. Unfortunately, electronic communication is limited in its ability to convey the feelings and intentions behind our words. This frequently leads to misunderstandings. Many successful deans invite faculty and staff members to speak
on the phone or in person rather than engage in lengthy e-mail exchanges. A quick way to choose a medium is to ask yourself: “Will it take more than a brief paragraph to explain the situation?” If the answer is yes, pick up the phone or call a meeting. Another useful guide comes from a question posed by a president: “Do you want your words to appear on the front page of the local newspaper?” In the age of nearly instant electronic communication, what we say, whether in writing or orally, can be shared around campus and across the country in moments, so choose your medium of communication as carefully as you choose your words.

Deans look forward to the opportunities to wrestle with big ideas and provide visionary leadership, and this is an important role. New deans can be surprised to learn that much of a dean’s daily work is management. At times, managing situations, people, and budgets interferes with the time necessary for “big picture” thinking and leadership. However, careful management and appropriate attention to detail are also important in being a successful dean. One must clearly articulate expectations and hold faculty and staff members accountable for their responsibilities. At the same time, the dean needs to empower individuals to carry out their duties. Department chairs in particular often feel as though they have very little power and influence, making their jobs quite difficult. Deans can help those individuals understand the influence that they do have. When the dean supports decisions made by chairs (and assistant or associate deans), this empowers those individuals and helps them to be effective leaders.

Being an effective manager and leader requires that deans be careful listeners, seeking out multiple points of view. Repeating back to another individual allows the dean to confirm that she has listened carefully: “What I hear you saying is that . . .” Some individuals will come to speak to the dean wanting little more than to be heard. They are not necessarily asking for the dean to solve a problem. After listening to a person air concerns, it can be helpful to ask what he would like to see done to resolve the problem and then guide the individual to find his own good solution.

Another role of an academic dean is problem solving when others are not able to do so or when it is not appropriate for them to solve the particular problem. This too can involve moving between a rock and a hard place. If the dean imposes a solution without careful listening and consultation, there will inevitably be pushback because the solution was handed down from “the administration.” Engaging faculty and staff members in problem solving allows the dean to suggest possible solutions and work with the individuals to find a solution that is acceptable to all parties. However, there are times when policy issues come into play and the dean must make decisions and impose solutions. Using careful communication to convey the decisions can mitigate any pushback that might arise.
Budget management is a critical part of a dean’s responsibilities. The chief financial officer can be the dean’s best friend or worst enemy. Building a good relationship with the CFO is important to success in managing budgets. Details are important. When seeking additions to the budget (or defending against cuts), clear, brief arguments are often the best way to make your case. Many college officers, unlike faculty, do not want to wade through lengthy arguments and justifications. The dean is also responsible for ensuring that departments and offices manage their budgets appropriately. A history of good management and balanced budgets is quite helpful when the dean is seeking increases in the budget. In contrast, frequent overspending will work against requests for additions to the budget.

Another important role of the dean is to hire (or oversee hiring of) the best individuals possible. One must build a strong team of assistant or associate deans and administrative support individuals. A team that you can trust and rely on in all situations is priceless. It should go without saying that overseeing the hiring of new faculty will have long-term implications for the college or university. Bad decisions can lead to difficult tenure cases, or worse. Faculty members who are good teachers and scholars but who do not get along with their colleagues can cause years of frustration and difficulty. If those individuals are tenured, it can hurt a department for decades. In contrast, hiring individuals who work well with their colleagues leads to strong departments. When the dean hires faculty members who are excellent teachers, scholars, and department citizens, and when those faculty members are supported and mentored and perform to their best ability, tenure cases can be a “slam dunk.” Those individuals often become future leaders of the faculty who will work well with the dean’s successors. However, search committees are not always in agreement (amongst themselves or with the dean) about the best candidate, providing the dean with another opportunity to glide between a rock and a hard place.

Many day-to-day responsibilities of the dean involve faculty and staff members, but the dean must work carefully also with other deans or vice presidents and the president. These relationships are also crucial to the success of a dean. In particular, a good working relationship with the dean of students can help to blend the boundaries between learning in and out of the classroom. Collectively, the senior leaders must support and protect the president, at least publicly. Making disagreements public can shorten a dean’s tenure dramatically. Supporting the president publicly, even when disagreeing privately, requires deft movements. The communications skills mentioned above are essential in these situations.

Deans are also mentors and talent scouts. Deans need to mentor faculty, especially new department chairs, to help them develop the leadership skills necessary for them to be successful in their jobs. Fortunately, there are
workshops and webinars to help department chairs. Search firms frequently send deans job advertisements and ask for recommendations of possible candidates. Deans should mentor associate deans so that they might someday move into a deanship themselves.

Being a dean is a difficult job. There are numerous roles and responsibilities, and there is never enough time. Working with the faculty is often compared to herding cats. Although this can be a nearly impossible task, you can put out cat food. Publicly celebrating the success of others, giving credit to faculty and staff members where it is due (and criticizing only in private), allows a dean to guide individualistic and disparate faculty and to build the relationships that will lead to a successful and rewarding deanship.

June 1, 2013. A week after graduation the campus was fairly quiet. Dean Sessions leaned back in his chair and sighed deeply. What a year it had been! There were plenty of challenges, some successes, and some things that he wished he had handled differently. He was reminded of the wise words he had heard at the ACAD annual meeting:

- Being a dean is not much different from being a scholar. One must learn to ask good questions, the right questions. One must learn to find good answers and help others find good answers.
- Perhaps most important, one must persuade others that the answers are well thought out and the conclusions are justified.
- And in the end, good relationships and good communication make it much easier to move between the rocks and the hard places.