Have you ever thought about putting students on “double secret probation” (as did the dean in Animal House)? Have you ever wondered about the life of a dean? How to become one? From Dean Wormer in Animal House to Dean Pelton in the sitcom Community, Dean Pritchard in Old School to even Dean Rooney from Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, there are not many flattering portrayals of the dean position. But that is okay—we have the best jobs in the world. Being a dean is one of the most exciting roles on campus. We may be working on issues that can be solved in three minutes or three years, or whipsaw from a 30,000 foot conversation to three inches in an instant. We get to be hard-wired into all aspects of campus from matriculation to graduation and beyond. Here, two deans from different backgrounds will give a gimlet-eyed snapshot of being a dean at a small college, including an overview of the chief student affairs officer’s portfolio, relationships, being a leader, tips on how to make the move to the deanery, and lessons learned that can help anyone new to the dean job.

The Dean’s Portfolio

Being a dean at a liberal arts college has some particular characteristics that will be highlighted in the chapter. The authors came to their positions from different paths. Scott has a student affairs background, coming up through the ranks, so he is familiar with the student affairs literature as well as having considerable hands-on experience; Steve was faculty in the department of anthropology before shifting over to administration. It is our hope that these different perspectives add to this overall assessment of being a dean.

A dean is the personification of educational leadership. Deans must leverage nearly every student affairs professional’s knowledge and skill to serve the institution most effectively. Ad-
ditionally, much of the dean’s job involves helping subordinates perform at their very best level. It is important to understand the specific skills required as a manager.

As a small community, a liberal arts college offers the dean an opportunity to think about the unique values of a broad education and to help shape priorities for the direction of the college. It is important to think about the unique “culture” of your institution, and to frame your priorities in terms of that culture.

The dean’s portfolio can cover many things such as personnel, managing key relationships, politics, crisis management/legal issues, diversity, and strategic planning managing (Tederman, 1997; Westfall, 2006). All these are important, but relationships in particular are critical to the position of dean.

Relationships

The dean must be able to connect with almost every campus constituency, each with specific needs and interests. This means internal constituencies (students, faculty, your direct reports, other administrative offices), external constituencies (parents, alumni/aes, Board of Trustees, Alumni Council, local elected and emergency personnel), and the president and other senior colleagues (e.g., admissions, communications, administration/finance, development, and provosts). A dean must manage all of these relationships effectively (Ellis, 2009).

Looking at this list, one can easily be struck by the wide range of people the dean must be able to interact effectively. Interpersonal skills are important. But what exactly do “interpersonal skills” mean? Are they an attribute of personality or can they be learned? One thing that every dean will say is that skills clearly do develop over time—the longer you have been a dean, the better your skills are. So it makes sense to think about articulating those skills, pointing out what works well with different constituencies.

One skill—probably the most basic and important—is to listen carefully and authentically to whoever you are interacting with. This sounds like a cliché, and it can be, but truly listening is an important skill that can be cultivated. As an anthropologist, Steve learned specifically about skills required for interviewing (see Leavy, 2011). One aspect is to genuinely hear what the interviewees are saying, and to convey that you are hearing them. Repeat back what they have said, starting with “Let me be sure I understand what you are saying.” Another key to conveying that you are listening is to ask questions, ask for more details, ask for specifics, ask them to “start at the beginning.” These skills are especially important for being a dean, as the dean has to be able to relate effectively; for example, to genuinely hear concerns expressed by parents. The dean may also often have to “get to the bottom” of situations, such as investigations, or ferret out what problems a student may be having at any given time. Being able to listen effectively is therefore an important skill.

Another is the capacity to see things from the point of view of others. This can be often glossed over as “having empathy” but it involves more than that. It involves understanding the overall context for the communication. Each person has basic understandings, cultural “schemas” that define how one interprets a situation (Quinn & Strauss, 1998). It is important for the dean to understand it and to know something of the way people are interpreting events. One striking fact, for example, is that today’s traditional-aged students understand “adulthood” as something that one attains at the age of twenty-seven or twenty-eight. This leads them to regard their parents differently from what we might expect if, say, they believed “true”
adulthood started at eighteen. Parents themselves, famous for their involvement with students’ lives, are calling the dean in part because their son or daughter may be exaggerating a situation to get their parents’ attention. All of this, the cultural understandings and the environmental context, needs to be appreciated by the dean.

The issue of different frames of reference based on basic understandings becomes especially important when the dean reviews the different types of relationships one has with various constituencies. Much of the dean’s time and energy is spent working with those that report to him or her, the directors and deans on the staff. Developing mentoring skills is an art that takes considerable practice. It is important to allow direct reports considerable independence, while at the same time correcting their errors and reinforcing their standards. There is also considerable value in reminding the direct reports of their importance and in giving positive feedback, even if it seems obvious, and therefore unnecessary, that they are doing a good job. The best situation is one where the direct report comes up with initiatives that fit with your overall objectives but are his/her own ideas.

The relationship with members of the Board of Trustees is very important, though very different. Here one learns that the overall positioning of the institution is an important consideration, and it is important to think about the institution from the point of view of a board member. The trustee is often an alumnus/a of the institution, and has distinct memories of how the school used to be. Trustees are also often leaders in their own right, and are used to calling the shots. Trustees view their roles as a board member as one of looking after the best interests of the institution, and of making sure that it is operating well. And the trustee is a financial contributor. The dean therefore must often walk a fine line between reporting only the good news, and engaging board members in very real issues that require their feedback. It is key to convey that you know what you are doing and have the institution’s best interest in mind. Plan in advance how you would like to have a board committee meeting go. Set the topics of conversation so that they can feel like they are contributing, but also make sure to keep in mind that they are looking for deficiencies, and you are there to reassure them. This relationship is a complicated and very important one.

Finally, it is also important to remember that being a dean is a prominent position on the campus. People will know who you are. And they expect a certain comportment that may at first be unfamiliar. Steve remembers how campus safety officers at first regarded him as distant and cold; when he looked into it to find the evidence, it was simply that he had been used to being a faculty and largely ignoring campus safety. He had therefore failed to acknowledge them with a wave or a smile when walking on campus. The officers, recognizing the head of their campus section, expected the dean always to acknowledge them. The situation (and reputation) was easily rectified by the dean’s simply making an effort to always acknowledge people who work for him. Someone who is new to being a dean may easily forget this feature of the dean’s relationships.

**Being a Leader**

One thing to recognize is that as a dean you are a leader, and as a leader you are expected to lead. This may sound obvious, but it is important to remember. It is easy to forget the degree to which your constituents look to you for guidance. This means that you should spend some time thinking about your priorities as the leader of an important department or division at the
college. Think about the issues your school faces. Then think about your approach to dealing with those issues. Articulate that approach to yourself. Identify its characteristics. For example, Steve, in coming from the field of anthropology, appreciated the importance of one-on-one interactions toward helping improve behavior in students. He also understood that everyone operates according to cultural assumptions. He then identified the "type" of student drawn to his college. He would quickly quip that those students were the "cool" people in high school, those who were athletes, those who were engaged, and those who were the "beautiful people" on the campus. From this he assumed that those students, in particular, were concerned about their self-image and looked to their peers to guide them—even to a greater extent than most college students. You could see it in the similar way they dressed, in their fashion sense.

What is the importance of all of this? Steve recognized that they, more than many students, would follow the example of their own leaders. This led him to focus, for example, on having the very best resident assistant (RA) program he could, because he understood that the RAs serve as critical role models at his college. He cultivated relationships with student leaders and was sure to convey to them his vision for what the ideal college would look like, hoping that they in turn would convey that to their peers, and that those peers would then try to emulate that model. He also shifted the focus of residential life toward a greater one-on-one emphasis, hiring enough residence directors to be sure that he had good supervision of the RA staff and also developed strong relationships with the students.

This is a fairly concrete model for how to think about his program, and it needed to be articulated to his staff. The staff could then pick up that direct relationships were important in their daily tasks, that those they supervised should value that as well. So the keys here are to articulate to yourself the characteristics of your particular vision, and then to convey that vision to all of your staff. The unique qualities of the leader will easily be transmitted down through all dimensions of your operation. Think of the impact of the distinctive philosophy of the late Steve Jobs, one leader, on the entire approach of Apple Computer. You can convey a similar distinctive philosophy to those who work under you.

Preparation for a Move: Pathway to the Deanery

Moving towards a dean position requires an intentional consideration of where to spend your discretionary time, no matter from what part of the institution you come. Make it easy for a search and selection committee to strongly make the case that you could do the position they are searching for. Some key strategies that will improve your chances:

Assess where you are today. This is an important starting point and can help ascertain where you are relatively strong, and those areas in which you need improvement. Think also about your priorities and your vision, and spend some time articulating them to yourself, so you can convey them in a job application.

Cultivate mentors. Most people will serve as a resource to you, but you have to manage these relationships. Being a dean requires a lot of hands-on knowledge which takes time to learn, so it is important to glean what you can from more experienced colleagues.

Diversify your portfolio. Don't get pigeonholed unless you like that hole. Constantly seek out collateral assignments in areas that will expand your scope, particularly if it is of a larger divisional or institutional nature. These can include doing a mini-internship in another area
(Dean of Faculty, Administration), chairing division-wide committees, or volunteering to be on search committees.

Be the one to volunteer to take on extra tasks. People in leadership positions are “can-do” people. They do not shy away from things that may be difficult. By volunteering to take on extra tasks, you convey that kind of persona. And often those tasks can be educational in themselves, so they are worth the effort.

Keep abreast of professional and related literature. A dean should be plugged in, as new research, laws, or trends can come to the fore quickly. Deans should have a range of periodicals, scholarly materials, websites and related materials outside of higher education that they monitor. Additionally, they should encourage staff to share pertinent info with them as well.

Get involved professionally. Professional organizations can be an easy way to gain exposure, network, and develop skills that the generalist requires. Major student affairs organizations have commissions and knowledge communities related to various functions and general administration. Most welcome any volunteers.

Study your dean, ask questions. What keeps your dean up at night? Read communications that come from that office and ask yourself, why is this coming out? What is the intention of this communiqué?

Advance your degree. There was a time when having a master’s degree with significant work experience would be plenty to secure. While this is still true depending on the institution, a doctorate is an opportunity to deeply study core issues of higher education.

Lessons Learned

Life accepts lessons from the School of Hard Knocks. These are a few, hard-won lessons that can be helpful to you as an aspiring or new dean.

Use multiple frames. As Bolman and Deal (2008) argue, organizational leadership requires the capacity to utilize multiple frames of reference to suit the particular context or objective: “structural” (organizing teams to get results); “human resource” (building positive interpersonal and group dynamics); “political” (building coalitions, dealing with internal and external politics); and “symbolic” (giving purpose and meaning to work, and building team spirit through ritual, ceremony, and story). All of those you interact with are influenced by scripts for how that interaction is supposed to go. So, for example, if you organize a retreat, it is important to think about the “frame” that people expect with retreats. They are looking to bond as a community and to develop some specific “big picture” objectives moving forward. It therefore makes little sense to organize a retreat around sharing how individual departments operate—it may be useful, but it does not fit well with the “retreat frame” that people bring to the situation.

Cultivate an information network. In this position, you will naturally have many formal and informal ways of receiving information. This is not merely gossip but will allow you as a person with decision-making power to be more understanding of the entire institutional eco-system and how one action may affect others. Think of yourself as a major node in a neurosystem that includes students, faculty, townsfolk, alums, and parents.
Learn from experience. One of the exhilarating, exhausting, and anxiety-provoking aspects of being a dean is the range of issues—crises—you have to deal with. Each year some significant issue, whether it be H1N1, a racial incident, a student death, a public embarrassment, may come across your desk, and the challenge is to develop the skills to deal with that wide range of issues. Much like a doctor who works at a hospital, the dean must use his or her experience to know how to respond. And as with a doctor, nothing replaces that experience. It is therefore important in dealing with a crisis to assemble a team of people to brainstorm on the crisis, to identify paths of actions, and to look ahead at possible repercussions. Then, following every incident, it is helpful to review what worked and what did not, so that you can most effectively use that experience in dealing with crises in the future.

Understand your faculty. Student affairs divisions are extremely important to the educational mission. However, the faculty are at the heart of any institution. At most institutions, particularly smaller liberal arts colleges, it is critical that student affairs deans be acutely aware of the best ways to extend and enhance the classroom experience in ways that are easiest for the faculty. The teaching environment is critically important to faculty. Faculty, to student affairs professionals, seem an odd breed. They seem to have a great deal of freedom to act in any way they want, they seem to be oblivious to the standards set by their supervisors. And they seem to think the world revolves around them! It is important to remember that faculty are highly skilled, highly educated people who have chosen to forego extra money to become professors. They do not want to work for a “boss.” Many prefer the relatively unstructured life of a faculty member, so they work hard to preserve that. Faculty initiatives therefore often have to be decided by consensus. Faculty often talk about how they “have no time” to do anything other than their job. And to a harried student affairs professional, they seem to work very little at first glance. But one critical thing to understand is that all faculty, in addition to developing and preparing for all of their classes, have long-standing projects, such as an article or a book, sitting over their heads. They will have to see structured interactions with student affairs as a part of their job, and therefore necessary. All of this regarding faculty means you will have to adopt a “paving over footpaths” approach that creates opportunities and interventions to work with faculty that flow naturally from the ways their lives are currently configured (Brown & Roseborough, 2007).

Create a personal advisory board. A dean position will often disallow having frank conversations with many people, and though you will be a strong leader, you should know whom you might turn to and for what. This can be anyone from a mentor to colleagues at similar institutions in another division. It is a place where you feel comfortable puzzling through some questions. Most, if not all, are generous, honest, and have accrued much wisdom. As noted above, it is especially important to tap advisors when facing some kind of crisis. Many minds are better than one in sorting out all of the issues that need to be addressed.

Think in terms of the “culture” of your institution. Colleges have features that cause them to build up distinct cultural environments over time. Like cultures, they often develop policies and practices with very little communication with other institutions. And the turnover of students every four years means that the culture of the school can change relatively quickly, becoming more distinct. When pursuing change, it is essential to recognize the basic parameters of the institution. For example, in some schools faculty have a direct say in all school policies, in others they don’t know “student affairs” from “student activities.” Some schools are top-down,
recognizing student voices only as an afterthought; at others, students define school policy. These characteristics, distinct at your school, are worth considering in enacting change.

Simplify, simplify, and simplify. The great coach Vince Lombardi was famous for paring down his offensive strategy for a given context to a small number of things that they did well and executed flawlessly. Cut out extraneous things. For example, Scott funnels everything to his email, and does what he can to keep his email at zero.

Control your calendar. Know your biorhythms. If there is a certain time of day or night when you are fresh—then protect it. Control your calendar when you can to actually get work done.

Be prepared to move quickly. A crisis, in any form, can scuttle your day’s activities. It is very easy to fall behind on your day-to-day chores. This often means you have to “call an audible” and quickly connect with key players in resolving the crisis. Good decisions need to be made quickly, with as much circumspection as possible.

Know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em. Your role as a dean is to help set the strategic direction and support your president. That means providing sage advice to help inform institutional decision making. Sometimes that will mean being more insistent if you know a particular direction is the best way to resolve an issue. However, it is also critical to know how, when you provide feedback that is not incorporated, to move forward and support the decision publicly. Something may be a good idea, but the time is not right, or you may not be the right champion for it.

Be friendly but not familiar. In this role, there is the reality that you have influence or control of another person’s livelihood. This is a great responsibility. Counter to what probably helped you get to this position, walk and do not run into relationships. We also realize our friendship can be a burden to subordinates, as they are constantly thinking of you as a dean and that you are possibly evaluating them.

Enlarge your sphere of influence. There are a number of ways that you can be an asset to your campus, thus enlarging the ways you can influence others in a positive fashion. You should be able to assess your situation within the campus context, understand the political landscape for student affairs, make strategic alliances, align with campus priorities, and implement a strategy (Brown & Porterfield, 2008; Strenger, 2009).

“Cross a street and cut a ribbon.” A colleague of ours explicitly uses every opportunity when she meets with key constituencies to educate them on the role of student affairs. Get a sense of how you can be helpful, and create partners. Knowing how to efficiently “work” a room at an event is important—you must be visible and engaged with many other attendees, but also able to leave briskly so you may attend other events.

Take care of yourself. Steve makes it a priority to play the piano during lunch. Scott protects his lunch hour and forces himself to exercise every day. All those Toll House pies take their toll! If you are comfortable, exercise in the school facility—it is also a way for you to humanize yourself, and we have met students and community members that we would have never known otherwise. Whatever works for you, build something into your schedule to refresh your mind and spirit.

Leave the place better than you found it. As a senior officer of the institution, you must resolve any conflict that will put the institution in a good place. This often means considering the im-
pact of your decisions many years down the road. It is up to you to help navigate many, often competing, stakeholders and priorities.

Conclusion

We believe work in higher education is the "secular sacred." People do not do this work for the money or the glamour. We get to work comprehensively with students at the most developmentally dynamic part of their lives. As student affairs professionals, we are "educational decathletes" who must know how and when to lead, manage, advise, teach, and counsel. We believe higher education work is truly a love made visible and higher education professionals, regardless of background, are called by the same sense of purpose, which galvanizes our work on our campuses.

References


