

Commander or Caretaker?

The Unique Role of an Interim Dean

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ABSTRACT: The temporary nature of the appointment to serve as an interim dean influences the myriad duties of academic leadership, including strategic planning, faculty and staff development, academic program development, and fundraising and public relations. Whether or not the interim decides to become a candidate for the permanent position is an important consideration. This paper examines what those appointed as interim dean can expect, including challenges all deans face and those unique to interim deans.

INTRODUCTION

When the leadership of an academic school turns over, typically an interim dean is appointed by the university until a comprehensive search can be organized and completed for a permanent replacement. Because of the length of the hiring cycle typical for higher education faculty and administration, the interim period rarely lasts less than an academic year and can stretch to multiple years in the event of a failed search or other extenuating circumstances, such as pending accreditation visits or leadership transitions in other areas such as provost or university president.

Much has been written about being a dean (e.g., Bedeian, 2002; Bright & Richards, 2001; Buller, 2007; Gallos, 2002), but little attention has been given to the motivations and incentives faced by those serving as interim in this vital role. For instance, some have described their experience where they are asked to serve as interim but are not permitted to be a candidate for the position and have top-down restraints while they serve (Johnson, 2021). Others such as Crocker (2013) and Boyle et al. (2016) describe how being an interim is much more than being

a placeholder. We seek to bridge that knowledge gap by describing how the incentives and circumstances faced by interims (Sabbath, 2004) may affect their behavior through the firsthand experiences of the authors.

Because of the unique nature and considerations associated with an interim situation, there are ramifications for the individuals involved as well as immediate and long-term impacts on the school and university. The purpose of this paper is to describe our experience based on our four distinct interim dean appointments. We provide insight into the unique challenges and opportunities that confront an interim dean. We examine differences in incentives between serving in an interim versus a permanent deanship and between being an interim who is not a candidate for the permanent role versus one who desires to be considered. Finally, we offer personal advice on what to expect in the role of interim based on our own experience in different academic units and universities. These insights should help universities decide who to appoint as interim dean as well as faculty members who have or desire the opportunity to serve in this unique administrative position.

BACKGROUND

Each of the authors of this paper were serving in the role of associate dean or equivalent when they were appointed interim. Two of the authors served as interim at the same institution approximately a decade apart, with one choosing to be a candidate for permanent dean and one declining the opportunity. In addition, one author served as an interim for two different academic units at different institutions. Collectively, the authors have served five years in the role of interim dean at two different universities. Four of the interim years were served in business schools and one year was within a school of education. Together, these experiences provide a wealth of insights into the opportunities, challenges, and incentives that shape the process of serving as an interim.

The dean is the academic leader of a school and has multiple responsibilities. Regardless of the academic discipline or size of the university, most deans are expected to provide strategic planning and direction, professional development of existing faculty and staff, develop new or improve existing academic programs, hire new faculty and staff as needed, and engage in fundraising and external relations. The dean is the internal leader of the academic unit, and the external “face” of the school to alumni and community constituencies. In addition, the dean must interface with higher administration to acquire resources for their school while also supporting university-wide goals and initiatives. In the following sections we discuss how being an interim may alter the incentives associated with each of these roles as well as whether being a candidate for the permanent deanship is an influence on the decision-making process.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Knowing how to manage while holding an interim position is a balancing act. There is a healthy tension between being too bold and postponing important decisions. In any case, one must be willing to decide and act in the best interests of the school. As the ultimate decision-maker for much of the school’s normal (daily) operations, it is important for an interim to recognize and utilize a strategic plan. Hopefully, this involves the use of an existing strategic plan, but there are times when creating a strategic plan from the ground up is required.

It is not uncommon for a university president or provost to charge an interim dean with the task of maintaining existing “momentum” as the school’s new leader. One of the first things a new interim should do is examine the exist-

ing strategic plan for the unit. Specific goals and objectives are typically spelled out in the school’s strategic plan. Are the goals and objectives practical? Has there already been progress to date towards implementation? Are there current goals that need to be followed through towards successful completion? The answers to these questions can help provide a framework for what actions should be prioritized in the early stages as the new interim adjusts to the role.

An additional role that an interim may be charged to undertake is that of a change agent. The short-term nature of the role may allow for university administrators to mandate that the interim make specific changes in curricula, organizational structure, and school leadership below the dean level. These directives may place the interim in the role of hero or villain, depending on the nature of the changes and how they affect the school’s current faculty and staff.

Of note is whether the interim intends to be a candidate for the permanent appointment. If not, then utilizing the existing strategic plan to guide the school’s actions makes sense. The goal is to continue to pursue previously identified goals and objectives so that the school does not languish during the interim search period. If the interim was appointed from the existing school leadership, they likely had a voice in crafting the strategic plan. An existing strategic plan has previously been approved by university leadership, so using it as a guide for strategic initiatives, resource allocation, and personnel decisions aligns with the directive to continue the current trajectory of the school during the search process.

However, if the interim dean decides to pursue a permanent appointment, there is a definite incentive to lead the school in the development of a new strategic plan. Doing so provides a platform to demonstrate leadership skills, affect buy-in by existing faculty and staff members, and put one’s own individual stamp on the school’s developing opportunities and priorities. Leading the development of a new, multi-year strategic plan may change the perception of the interim from placeholder to leader, which may positively influence both search committee members and university administration. Clearly, the decision on whether an interim will be a candidate for the permanent position influences the school’s strategic planning process.

FACULTY AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

One of the key objectives of the interim is to create an environment that promotes continued faculty and staff development. When an existing leader departs, great uncertainty is introduced into the culture of the school. Questions such as who will serve as interim, who will be

chosen for the search committee, how long it may take to complete the search, and how much influence the school's constituents will have on the ultimate selection of the next dean can create a culture of instability.

One of the ways an interim can help alleviate this uncertainty is through intentional actions that communicate faculty and staff development remains a priority. Performance reviews are especially tricky during the interim period. An honest appraisal of past performance along with helping each faculty and staff member set and achieve future goals is a best practice. Nevertheless, there can be pressure to do otherwise. An interim who is a candidate for the permanent position may elect to shirk their responsibilities and assign much more favorable reviews than warranted. This practice may be part of courting faculty and staff support for the internal candidate in the search process.

Likewise, the interim who is not a candidate in the search is confronted with the realization that (perhaps for the first time) it is their responsibility to evaluate the performance of colleagues. Acknowledging the inevitable return to faculty or department chair responsibilities provides incentives to go easy in performance reviews. Unfortunately, this practice sets the incoming dean up for difficulties when trying to recalibrate the scales by providing meaningful feedback. An interim may utilize department chairs for leading the faculty performance reviews as a useful buffer from the tensions occurring during the interim deanship. Regardless of the intentions of the interim regarding the permanent search process, it is important for the development of both individuals' and the school's overall health to devote time and effort to provide constructive feedback on faculty and staff performance. Neglecting to do so may be detrimental to the growth and success of the school and cause difficulties for the new dean regardless of who is chosen.

Another key personnel decision concerns the dean's role in faculty promotion and tenure deliberations. In most schools, the support of the dean is critical to the outcomes in university promotion and tenure decisions. Faculty serving in the role of interim may suddenly find themselves literally having the responsibility of a colleague's professional future in their hands.

Incentives may play a large role in the promotion and tenure decisions of interims. If the interim is a candidate for the permanent position, there is strong incentive to promote and grant tenure to faculty candidates. Withholding support sends an ominous message to junior faculty members and those facing future promotion decisions. Alternatively, an interim who is not a candidate may utilize their temporary position to impair or block the professional progress of an unfavored colleague. The power that comes with the

dean's office should be imparted solely for the long-term benefit of the school, but the history of higher education is rife with promotion and tenure disaster experiences. In some cases, the voice of the interim may not be as strong or as influential as that of the school's faculty promotion and tenure committee due to the temporary nature of the interim appointment. Nevertheless, those accepting an interim's role must recognize the influence and discretion that comes with key personnel decisions.

It is vital for an interim dean to monitor all details to ensure that school and university handbook policies are followed, resulting in an equitable promotion and tenure process. This typically involves working with and advising the faculty member serving as chair of the promotion and tenure committee, meeting with the committee to ensure continuity in standards, and interacting with university-wide committees and the provost to assure consistency and transparency throughout the process.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

An interim who is not a candidate for the permanent position will probably not have the opportunity to start new academic programs unless the creation of those new programs was already underway at the department or program level. First, the length of time typically required to initiate, development, and shepherd new programs of study through the school and university curriculum approval process may be longer than the expected interim period. Second, there may be holdover issues that cause faculty to be reluctant to support new programs discussed or initiated under the previous dean.

However, if the interim wishes to be a candidate for the permanent position, then there is an incentive to start new academic program development. Doing so shows creativity, an inclination to consider new ideas, and deference to existing faculty members who desire more opportunities to teach and recruit new colleagues in a specialty area of interest.

Should the interim be selected to become the permanent dean, the fact that new program development took place while the search process was underway jumpstarts the new regime and gives the newly selected dean an early success story. But if the interim is not selected, problems can ensue. A new dean will want to begin their own curriculum development process, and inheriting a new program proposal already within the approval process can create tension. Should scarce resources be allocated to a new program under development if it doesn't align with the new dean's vision for the school? If the university curriculum commit-

tee has already approved the new program, is the new dean obligated to continue forward with implementation? These types of questions may serve as distractions and run counter to an interim's goal of keeping things steady and providing the incoming new dean with a clean slate with which to begin their leadership.

FUNDRAISING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Perhaps no area of a dean's responsibilities is more susceptible to the conflicts of interest arising from an interim being a candidate for the permanent position than that of fundraising and public relations. Fundraising is difficult, and many faculty members chosen to serve in an interim position may have little or no previous experience. However, the incentive to "make a splash" by obtaining a large external gift to the school is strong for those seeking a permanent appointment.

Interim fundraising success is often driven by board members or other supporters who wish to signal to university administration or search committees their desire for the interim to receive a permanent appointment. Outside of that type of support, interims may face challenges landing larger gifts as donors; alums and community supporters prefer to delay decisions pending the arrival of the new dean to allow their gifts to have the maximum amount of influence. Similarly, fundraising success will likely wane during the intermittent period between the naming of a new dean and the time the individual arrives to begin work. Donors are likely to withhold their giving until the new dean is installed to determine if their own interests and vision for the school align with those of the new leader.

While a short-sighted view may deem any new resources as a plus for the school, experienced fundraisers know that there is a limited amount of available external resources and that going for a quick success story may undermine longer term, larger, and more strategic needs of the unit. Further, fundraising within a single school must be coordinated through university advancement. Often, certain donors or gifts are prioritized by administration based on university goals and needs. An interim operating independently by trying to make a big impact may undercut other strategic initiatives or incur the animosity of other deans or administrators.

Regardless of whether the interim is a candidate for the permanent role, he or she must serve as the face of the school to external constituencies. This includes alumni, community entities, civic organizations, local media, and prospective students and parents. Doing so provides reassurance that the academic unit is stable and not regressing

during the search process. Of course, effectively executing public relations will be a boost for interims who seek to become permanent, but the possibility of conflicts and the creation of potential problems for the new dean are less in this aspect of the interim's role. Students and parents readily adapt to the interim as the academic unit leader, and many external constituents are content to accommodate the interim while taking a wait-and-see approach to the ultimate outcome of the search process.

WHAT TO EXPECT AS AN INTERIM DEAN

The role of interim dean is a unique experience. Even if there is previous experience as a department chair or other administrative position, nothing compares to being in the dean's seat. In this section, we draw on multiple experiences at different schools to provide insights that will (hopefully) enhance the success of someone serving in the role of interim dean.

First, you must be yourself and not attempt to emulate the previous dean (or anyone else). Everyone has their own style, but it is human nature to detect inauthentic actions and behavior. If one tries to act in a manner inconsistent with their personality, their efforts will be undermined with faculty, staff, students, and possibly senior administration. Part of the message is to acknowledge that you are different from your predecessor. It is important not to belittle or criticize the previous dean. For better or worse, their tenure is over. However, an interim's tenure can be complicated if the former dean is still at the university in a new role or has or will return to faculty in the future. As the interim, you represent the present leadership of the school. If you desire to be a candidate for the permanent role, from day one you are providing all constituents with a preview of how things will be different under your leadership.

Be ready for criticism. This applies to those who are, and who are not, candidates for the permanent position. Do not expect it to pass or decrease with time. Criticism of current decisions and comparisons with the prior administration will happen, even after the permanent dean is selected. A thick skin and ability to show grace will be required no matter how successful an interim period transpires. Take the high road with others and avoid the tendency to be defensive or ill-tempered. Remember, the students, faculty and staff of the school will never have access to the same information or insights that the dean has. Most students are primarily concerned with immediate issues, and faculty tend to be focused on short-term individual (i.e., their own classes, committees, tenure and promotion efforts) or

departmental issues. An effective dean, whether interim or permanent, must consider how every decision affects the degree value and university reputation for those who already graduated, those who are currently matriculating, and those who will (hopefully) enroll years into the future. It is a vastly broader perspective, and those criticizing decisions made in the dean's office have not been, and likely will never be, required to consider such a wide range of constituencies and time frames. Decisions should be made with the best long-term interests of the school and university in all circumstances, regardless of criticism from faculty and staff.

One aspect of the role of interim that will likely differ from any previous administrative experience is that the dean serves as the academic unit's liaison with the rest of the university. It is imperative to develop a working relationship with the provost or chief academic officer and keep that person informed regarding all aspects of the school's operations. Remember that the provost controls all resources, so being transparent and having prior approval of new initiatives is vital. Likewise, having the support of the provost and important associate/assistant provosts and other office staff for difficult personnel decisions will be critical. Do not be surprised if faculty members jump the chain of command and go directly to the chief academic officer with problems or concerns. This is not healthy for the academic unit, and an effective and perceptive provost will stop this practice immediately. However, even if they do allow faculty access to their office, a provost having prior knowledge of a situation or problem minimizes the disruptiveness of jumping the chain of command. Likewise, a provost who has previously indicated their support of the interim dean's decisions means such behavior will have limited impact. This is particularly critical for decisions regarding hiring, promotion, and tenure.

The interim must also establish working relationships with the other deans on campus. The dean's council, comprised of all sitting deans across the university, will be vital to communicate and coordinate with so that conflicts are avoided regarding strategic initiatives, events, or new program development. This is especially true with deans that share joint or dual degree programs or share jointly appointed faculty. Ignoring the incentives and concerns of other deans can quickly create unnecessary problems for your own academic unit and ultimately for the provost as well.

One strong piece of advice drawn from our own experiences is to appoint an interim associate dean. This can be a tricky proposition for multiple reasons. First, if the newly appointed interim was previously serving as associate dean of the school, the university will quickly perceive an opportunity for cost savings during the search process by tempo-

rarily combining two positions into one. Nevertheless, part of the interim appointment process should be lobbying the provost to allow the temporary appointment of an associate dean. The workload is too great for one individual to handle all issues, internal and external. The interim will often be away from the dean's office, dealing with university issues and external functions that require leadership representation on behalf of the school. The interim associate dean can handle daily operations and represent the school as needed when the interim is unavailable.

Second, many faculty members will resist the opportunity to serve as interim associate unless there is a strong likelihood of maintaining the position permanently. A sitting department chair may be the best option, since they are already used to serving in an administrative role and can likely revert to the chair position seamlessly once the dean search process concludes. Despite these obstacles, not having an associate dean sets the interim up for, if not failure, at least an exhausting schedule and slate of responsibilities that are not sustainable.

SHOULD AN INTERIM PURSUE THE PERMANENT DEAN POSITION?

There are advantages and disadvantages to being an internal candidate for a dean position. Some of the advantages include knowing the culture, the personalities, and the potential landmines ahead of time. The ability to come up to speed quickly and begin to effectively lead makes such insider knowledge highly valuable. In most schools, a new dean will encounter (at least) three types of faculty members, including those who were happy under the previous administration, those who were unhappy, and those who attempt to ignore administration as much as possible. Every new dean will have to deal with these differing constituencies and knowing ahead of time who the respective players are and how many constitute each group will be valuable. Having a prior working relationship with the provost and the university president will be helpful as well.

However, a new dean hired externally typically enjoys a "honeymoon" period extending at least the first year. During this time, the university has a vested interest in the dean's success and will tend to be more accommodating with respect to new resources and other types of support. This may afford the new dean the opportunity to address critical issues and differentiate themselves in style and priorities from the previous dean. An internal hire is not necessarily afforded this luxury. Being a known commodity, the assumption is an internal hire will represent continuity and

be expected to understand and conform to the existing culture immediately. Unfortunately, university administration often views internal dean hires as an opportunity for cost savings, offering an incremental stipend to the existing salary rather than paying the market wage for new deans.

Prior to accepting the opportunity to serve as an interim, candidates should consider several key negotiation topics. Asking these questions and getting resolution/commitment on these matters in writing is important. A good faith/handshake agreement with today's provost can lead to broken promises and hurt feelings with their replacement. Candidates should agree to what a return to faculty would look like if they are not a candidate or if they do not get the permanent position. This could include faculty title changes, chair or professorship appointments, faculty office or laboratory space, graduate assistants, and administrative support staff. Negotiating a sabbatical between the service time as interim and a return to full-time faculty is also recommended. This allows for the rest and re-engagement needed following the administrative appointment required for new course preparations and a likely need to enhance the research pipeline. Additionally, this gives the "new dean" a chance to have at least a semester without the shadow of the former interim being cast over decisions and potential new directions. Interims are often able to keep much, if not all, of their salary when they return to faculty. This is a common practice, but specifics regarding the retreat salary and benefits should be negotiated up front, before accepting the interim appointment. Lastly, some interims have been able to negotiate a reduced teaching load on a short-term or even permanent basis in exchange for their service time as interim.

Finally, two additional considerations gleaned from our experience. If an interim decides to be a candidate for the permanent position, they should be prepared to leave the university if their candidacy is unsuccessful. First, not being supported or chosen by the search committee may diminish the candidate's reputation in the eyes of peers. Second, there will inevitably be some tension with the new dean since the knowledge of the interim's candidacy will be public and there may likely be at least some resentment on the part of the interim who was not chosen. It is certainly not mandatory, but our experiences both in serving as interim deans and observing others serve in this unique role indicate that an interim who chooses to apply for the permanent position should be prepared to reenter the job market if they are not appointed to the permanent position.

A second consideration is that interims should save room to change their mind. Some interim appointments carry the stipulation that the individual serving as interim will not be a candidate for the permanent deanship. Avoid

this limitation if possible. Be open to the possibilities that an interim appointment can create whether at the current school or at a new university. One of the authors entered their interim deanship with an express goal of serving their interim period and happily returning to faculty. They quickly realized that they enjoyed the challenges of serving as the administrative leader of the school and decided to pursue the permanent deanship. Fortunately, that choice remained viable due to the lack of predetermined constraints on future career options.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this paper, we share our experiences and perspectives while highlighting some of the opportunities, challenges, and constraints that may be imposed on those serving as an interim dean. Whether the interim is a candidate for the permanent deanship or not, we strongly encourage those who serve to enjoy the time as the temporary leader and face of the school. This opportunity will provide a glimpse of the broader institutional perspective of the university not observed as a faculty member or lower-level school administrator. Likewise, serving as interim dean allows university administration to evaluate an individual's talents and capabilities for other opportunities within the university. Finally, an interim dean carries the responsibility to act in managing the school's day-to-day operations, finances, faculty members and staff as well as to interact with prospective and current students, accreditation matters, and external constituencies. This is a vital step in preparing all parties for the arrival of the new dean, who just might be you!

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