

A Dean's Life

The role is people-intensive, fraught with great responsibility, and rich with possibilities for success and failure. One dean shares his personal story—and explains why he loves his job.

by Richard Klimoski

The business school dean was meeting with his faculty when an angel appeared in a haze of golden light. The angel offered the dean the choice of great wisdom or great wealth. Without hesitation, the dean chose wisdom. “It is done,” the angel pronounced, touching his hand to the dean’s head before disappearing. The professors all crowded around the dean, eager to know what great knowledge he had suddenly acquired. The dean thought a moment and then said sadly, “I should have chosen great wealth.”

Many faculty members may already believe that if they become deans and are given this magical choice, the money would be a better bet, because they will be bringing with them years of wisdom accumulated during their professorships. The truth is, however, that even very effective faculty members might not be effective deans. They can build on their experience, but it’s no guarantee.

I was a faculty member for more than 30 years before I became a dean in 2002, and I confess I didn’t have a clear idea of what the new job would entail. Most faculty don’t. And while I believe most deans can empathize with what it’s like to be a faculty member, it’s amazing how easy it is to forget. The dean’s job really does change a person—and it should.

Managing the Job

The first thing professors might notice when they become deans is that they’ll feel as if they’re suddenly starting over. As senior faculty, they have reputations, even personas. As deans, they’re completely green. They need to reestablish their credibility—and if they’re taking the job at certain stages of their lives, that can be tough. When I became dean at George Mason, for instance, I had to build a reputation among my ten fellow deans, most of whom had been in their leadership roles for years. This took time.

I also quickly discovered that it’s surprisingly difficult for deans to manage their time and schedules. Most academics stay busy; but when they take on extra work it’s at their discretion; and, in general, their schedules follow a predictable rhythm. Deans have less control over their time and must learn to change direction on short notice. While professors often put in extra hours, deans multiply those demands on their time. I attend many 6 a.m. breakfasts, and sometimes I attend more than one breakfast in a day. The scheduling difficulties bleed into family life, so my wife and I have had to readjust our expectations of the time we can spend together.

It becomes critical for a dean to invest in a new time-management system, usually an electronic one. I also have an assistant who helps arrange my calendar and lets senior staff know when I’m available so that they can plan their days accordingly.

Doing the Work

I find that one of the biggest changes between being a faculty member and being a dean lies in how the work gets done. A professor’s hands touch the work; if he makes commitments, he feels obliged to honor them personally. A dean must accomplish most initiatives through the talent and effort of other people. If I promise alumni or stakeholders that they will be invited in as class speakers, I have to rely on other



Dean Richard Klimoski on May 18, 2007, Commencement Day at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia

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people to deliver on my word. As the point of contact for many in the community, I am in this position fairly often.

Once deans realize how much they rely on others, they generally make two new discoveries. First, they learn how important it is to hire good people. It’s critical to fill faculty and staff positions with individuals who will lead to a “virtuous cycle” of hiring. Strong faculty members serve as powerful recruiting tools, because they are deeply interested in working with high-quality peers—and because top candidates look for schools where their potential colleagues share a keen appreciation for excellence.

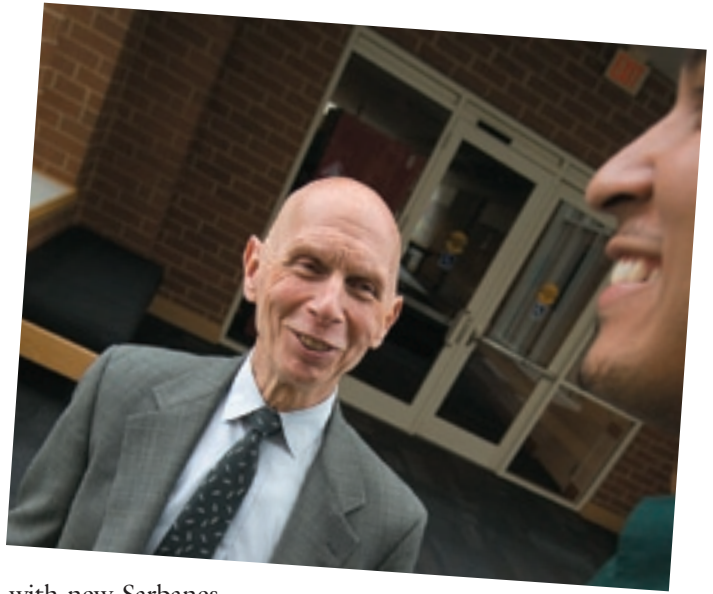
Second, new deans often discover that they feel a strong temptation to micromanage. Deans typically ask their faculty to undertake the kind of work they used to do—and do well—such as designing new courses or managing student concerns. At some point a dean might think, “I’d rather do it myself!” In academic jargon, this is a form of the “agency” problem brought about when one person is hired to do someone else’s work. But most deans have important tasks associated with the external life of the school. As tempting as it is to be at the school all day to keep the trains running, they must resist the urge.

Once I became dean, I tried to monitor how I was spending my time. I decided that if I was spending more than 50 percent of my day in my academic building addressing operational issues, I wasn’t doing my job. But deans can be seduced into spending too much time on business school processes—such as budgeting, recruiting, and course staffing—if they don’t have good people in place or if their processes are broken. This leaves them too little time to carry out their more important duties, such as meeting with donors, partnering with companies, or strengthening relationships with parents or alumni.

Working Through Others

Because I work with and through others, I am sometimes discouraged by how long it takes to make something happen. I never realized how ponderous a process it is to revise the curriculum or get a course on the books or design a new degree program. I never realized how long it takes to recruit an academic colleague or a state employee. A dean who wants to bring about change might get edgy and impatient at the time constraints. Deans must learn both to balance the needs of diverse stakeholders and to instill a sense of urgency about any project.

Because deans work through others, they face a question that troubles all executives. How do they gather valid information? I’m sympathetic to CEOs who are concerned



with new Sarbanes-Oxley provisions that require them to sign off on accounting reports. Is it really possible for deans to know all the financial details at their schools? A dean must find ways of defining what data are needed and create a system that produces accurate and timely financial information.

In fact, one of my challenges has been to develop an information and reporting system for the whole business school, which helps us manage the school and feeds our accreditation maintenance needs. Now, if the associate dean for undergraduates says, “Our students are learning a great deal,” I don’t say, “Thanks!” and then go for a cup of coffee. I say, “Show me the numbers.” If one of my professors asserts, “I’m famous. Give me a raise,” we go over the record that is part of our performance management system. It becomes obvious that a dean must manage indirectly, not just through the efforts of good people, but through the availability and use of good data.

Dealing with People

Another thing a new dean learns is that the business model of the job is people-intensive. As a faculty member, I knew that my department’s budget was mostly tied to personnel, but I wasn’t prepared for the fact that, as a dean, 99 percent of my challenges would be people-related.

Yes, at the professor level, relationships matter. But the typical faculty member doesn’t have to manage so many relationships at the same time. As a professor, I was always interested in my colleagues and my students. As a dean, not only must I be interested in *their* lives, but I must care about the needs and aspirations of the provost and the president. I must be interested in the needs of the other deans. The number and nature of the people-oriented problems coming my way have expanded exponentially.

Deans quickly learn how personal matters can become personnel matters. On the positive side, we can take pleasure in the achievements of our faculty and staff. As a new



dean, I created a monthly “Dean’s Tea” event so we could celebrate professional awards, major publications, the births of children, or significant family events. But deans have to be prepared for unhappy events as well, including deaths, illnesses, or incapacitating personal problems.

The degree of intimacy inherent in some relationships creates additional ethical, moral, and discretionary challenges. It’s absolutely necessary to be discreet and to keep confidences, yet it’s also important to solve a problem in a way that serves the party involved while preserving the integrity of the school.

Another way of saying this is that it’s critical for deans to operate in a principled manner, as opposed to a more ad hoc, case-by-case, or post facto way. If deans want a humane and just workplace for everybody, they must *create* such an environment. They must understand that their behaviors, decisions, and choices help define the climate, whatever it might be—a climate of excellence, of fear, of integrity. What deans do and don’t do, what they say and don’t say, when they intervene and don’t intervene, all turn out to be extremely important.

Wielding Power

That brings me to the issue of power. I remember reading a 1978 paper by Tom Peters in which he makes two key points. First, he observes that leaders often think they have more power than they really do—a notion I quickly discarded after I became dean. Second, he notes that leaders often fail to realize that the tools they have at their disposal are the mundane ones. They can influence events by deciding what meetings to call, whom to invite to sessions, what issues to place on the agenda, or how to frame an issue so that it remains manageable. To use Peters’ terminology, these tools reflect the dean’s use of symbols, settings, or patterns of behavior. If they’re all aligned and consistently implement-

ed, these indirect tools have a cumulative effect. I have taken these ideas to heart.

As a new dean, I discovered that the acquisition and use of power is an art. Professors amass power in their own ways, often relying on relationships or on their expertise, but they rarely have much control over resources. Deans do have access to resources, and at issue is how they use these and other sources of power. How much do they achieve through peer influence, how much through logic, how much through expertise? Professors who want to become deans will have to figure out their own relationships to power.

As dean, I’ve also learned how to structure situations to gain “ecological” power. By that, I mean I look for ways to manage the environment that sustains the decision-making processes of the business school. Most deans learn to structure situations so good outcomes are more likely to occur. For example, deans who want to hire high-quality professors invite high-quality faculty to do the recruiting.

Deans also exert influence by how they organize meetings. They can influence not only the agenda, but the form of the meeting. For example, at George Mason, our charter and our traditions demand that we have a formal monthly meeting for business school faculty and staff. But I soon learned it was not the best place for certain kinds of important conversations to take place. So I created an alternative venue called an open forum where faculty and staff can better address key—and often emotional—challenges. Here, participants can discuss issues such as how well we are meeting our teaching mission or how we might define faculty performance standards. Anyone can show up and contribute to the discussion and thus help set the school’s future agenda.

Accepting Responsibility

Something else I’ve learned as a dean is how it feels to be responsible for the lives of others. Traditionally, professors are lone wolves who thrive on autonomy and independence.

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A dean, on the other hand, always has to be thinking about the welfare of others.

This came home to me a few years ago when some of our graduate students were preparing to go to Latin America as part of their required foreign tour. There had been serious disturbances in Argentina, and people were rioting in the streets. The MBA director asked me, “What do we do?” As a professor, I might have said, “It’s important to me, and I still want to go!” But as the dean, I could not be so self-focused. This was, in effect, a risk management situation. I realized, “I have to think this through and consider the welfare of all those involved.” Ultimately, we decided to change the itinerary and avoid that country. To me, making that decision was a challenge involving ethical leadership.

Related to this sense of responsibility for others is the issue of accountability. In my view, accountability and responsibility are two different things. Responsible individuals are self-monitoring; they behave according to personal values and accept any consequences for actions and outcomes. On the other hand, individuals who must explain their actions to someone else are being held accountable. Naturally, as a professor, I was both responsible and accountable, but I had a fairly limited set of constituents.

As dean, I represent everyone at the school. I’m in the middle of a set of relationships that both demand responsibility and create accountability. I have to face my faculty when the provost doesn’t give us any money for raises or when I fail to secure a big endowment. I have to explain to the provost why my faculty aren’t publishing more or why faculty teaching evaluations are low. And yet, it’s not my day job to publish or teach; once again I must influence others if I’m to be successful in my job. I’m accountable, not just for my own behavior, but for the behavior of others.

I’m also accountable to a great variety of stakeholders—students, parents, alumni, and donors, as well as the school’s faculty and staff and the university administration. This means that anything I do not only reflects on me but on my school, and anything my staff does reflects on me. The pressure can be awesome.

Acting as Figurehead

An area where both responsibility and accountability obligations come together is in the dean’s role as figurehead, or symbolic leader of the business school. At times, as dean, I have participated in legal activities, such as signing a memorandum of understanding. At other times, I have carried out more social duties, such as hosting a major guest of the university.



The figurehead role is most visible at ceremonies. Some are traditional and involve great ritual. For example, every semester I welcome each cohort of graduate students. Every spring, I preside over a convocation for graduating students and their families. Last year, I shook hands with no fewer than 865 individuals as they walked across the stage. It was a very joyful event.

At times, being a figurehead requires managing far less pleasant ceremonies. That was the case when I hosted the service commemorating the untimely death of a faculty member. Most recently, this kind of responsibility fell to me as George Mason tried to do its part to deal with the great tragedy that took place at Virginia Tech, our neighboring state university in Blacksburg. Even as I was trying to work out for myself the meaning of what had happened on that campus, I was expected to speak publicly to and on behalf of my business school constituents. Certainly, such somber occasions arise for all of us, whether we are professors, family members, or friends. But it seems they occur with greater frequency and carry more gravitas for deans.

Keeping Connections

Not only does the role of dean come with great responsibility, it also potentially entails some sacrifices. The first thing former professors might find themselves giving up when they become deans is their connection to their disciplines and their students.

As a faculty member coming up through the ranks, I had an identity that was firmly rooted in my field. Over the years, I had enjoyed some acclaim for my scholarly contributions. But a dean typically has much less time to devote to research and writing. Even though a “promotion” to dean put me in a much more visible academic position, my scholarly reputation was quickly at risk.



For those deans who plan to hold the position for a fixed period of time and then go back to the ranks of the professoriate, it's terribly important not to lose momentum. Those deans must try to stay intellectually active and involved in professional societies, though it is a challenge to keep up with major developments in their fields. If at all possible, they must continue to write and publish.

Those who see the appointment to dean as a career shift might not work as hard to keep up with their fields, but most of them find it difficult to give up their professional identities entirely. They often try to find ways to stay tied to their disciplines even as they move into new careers in academic leadership. Anyone who chooses to become a dean has to decide how much effort to put into nurturing connections with the past.

Deans also find it harder to keep a direct connection with students. Anyone who has been a successful faculty member for a long time must care about students. Deans care about students, too, but in a much more abstract way. Deans who want to maintain the personal connection might consider mentoring doctoral students or teaching an honors course. I have a colleague who is a dean in the arts and sciences school, and he tutors high-risk students in mathematics. He has found an important way to maintain his connection.

I have continued to be active in research, although I am doing fewer laboratory bench studies and more review papers and book chapters. I serve on several editorial boards, and I'm an associate editor for the *Academy of Management Learning & Education* journal. I'm on the foundation for one of my professional societies, and I continue to present at national scientific societies. It's clearly important to me to stay connected to my discipline.

I've done less on the student side, although when I became dean, I did retain a doctoral student whom I saw through graduation. But I miss the interaction with students. I'm thinking about teaching a new undergraduate introduction course aimed at freshmen who are considering

becoming business majors, even though I worry about the unpredictability of my schedule and how often I might be forced to miss a class.


Creating a Legacy

Those who are thinking about becoming deans might also consider what kind of legacy they want to leave behind when their careers are done. A professor's legacy is sometimes manifested in the protégés who have gone on to be successful in life, and sometimes in the books published or the scientific contributions made to a particular field.

I feel that a dean has the potential for leaving behind something bigger and longer-lived than a publication. Deans might spearhead major curriculum changes that have the potential to affect thousands of lives. They might commission and oversee the building of new facilities so that their legacies become part of the environment. Or they might secure major revenue-producing endowments that will increase the potential success of their schools and their graduates well into the future. The chance to leave such a legacy might be the greatest difference between being a faculty member and being a dean, and in my position I give a great deal of thought to that opportunity.

Of course, a legacy also can take the form of a strong and enduring school culture. With this in mind, I constantly reflect on the principles and processes that I hope will be seen as valuable enough to continue once I'm gone. I routinely try to depersonalize many of the things I do. I think about what's good—not just for me and not just for right now. In part, the propagation of culture means having a wonderful team of faculty and administrators in place so that if I disappeared, the school would continue to prosper. It also means thinking about what I can do to leave my mark over and above a legacy of a strong and functional business school culture.

A Fascinating Mix

I love being an academic dean, and I hope to continue to have responsible senior academic leadership positions well into the future. I like the tempo and excitement involved. I like the mixture of responsibilities and duties and, yes, even the challenges that I must face on a regular basis. I like to effect change. But most important, I like the idea of leaving behind something that endures long after I have moved on. 

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