

Dean's Corner

Succession Planning in Business Schools?



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Many business school administrators I know became administrators “by accident.” It was either their turn, no one else would take the job, or a similar reason. We also know that turnover in the dean’s position is high. Could these two facts be related? The corporate world plans for leadership succession. Why do business schools not do the same? The principles for both are similar.

I was one of the few, it seems, who was mentored to the dean’s position. The department head of my Ph.D.-granting institution shared that he thought I would be a dean one day because of the confluence of my strengths and expectations of the job. He and another early mentor challenged me to take advantage of opportunities to prepare for this eventuality. Fortunately, after tenure, a new dean asked me to get into administration and the rest, they say, is history.

So how does this relate to you and succession planning? You can identify assistant and associate professors who have the skills, temperament, and credentials to serve as administrators. Start having conversations with them and any others who want to explore administration. As a facilitator of AACSB’s Lessons for Aspiring Deans Seminar, it has become apparent that many attendees (faculty to associate deans) do not really know what deans (and other administrators) do all day! Last spring at Mississippi State, I hosted three “conversations about administration” sessions. These were unstructured conversations in which interested faculty asked and I answered questions. Based on these discussions, some colleagues learned that they have an interest in administration, while others said “no thanks” (but now have a greater appreciation of what administrators’ lives are like). For those with an interest, I have the opportunity to help them close their gaps by challenging them with committee leadership, “friend-raising” activities, and the like. Mentoring is important!

A dean I talked with about this said, “But if I do this, they may leave and go to another school!” They might (and should!) if they are ready for the responsibilities of the job and there are no opportunities at their home institution. Personally, I would much rather lose a terrific leader to another institution than have frustrated folks because there are no opportunities in my business school (a frustrated person is not a good thing!). We need good administrators everywhere!



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I challenge you to be alert for faculty members who might be terrific administrators. Mentor them, send them to the Lessons for Aspiring Deans Seminar, and/or challenge them with tasks outside of their comfort zone. All of our business schools will be better for this.

And you know what's really neat? One of my young faculty members, in my first conversation with him two years ago, shared that he wanted my job one day. Today, he is a new department head and I predict he will be a dean, but not today. I have more mentoring to do!