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The Work of a Dean

Robert W. Ferris

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To be named dean of a theological college or seminary is both a great privilege and an immense responsibility. Most come to that position from faculty appointment and find themselves more comfortable in the classroom than in the dean's office. The situation is not eased by access to literature. A recent study suggests 'the academic deanship is the least studied and most misunderstood position in the academy'.[1] While a 1995 study of chief academic officers, sponsored by the Association of Theological Schools, generated both quantitative and qualitative data,[2] most articles are autobiographical reflections on deanship. As such, they offer wisdom but little specific guidance.

One quickly learns that the dean is expected to fulfil a host of discrete and sometimes conflicting responsibilities. Whether included in the official position description or not, a dean typically functions as manager of instructional programs, budgets and finance, marketing and recruitment, legal compliance, institutional assessment and accreditation, and institutional crises. She or he must be advocate of instructional support, mediator of competing constituencies, arbitrator of student complaints and appeals, and builder of faculty consensus, as well as entrepreneur, politician, teacher, scholar, mentor, and sage![3] One descriptive study identified fourteen 'primary responsibilities' of academic deans[4] while

1 Clint E. Bruess, James E. McLean, and Feng Sun, 'Determining Education Deans' Priorities', ERIC ED 482 513 (2003), p. 2.

2 Jeanne P. McLean, Jeanne P. (Ed.), 'The Study of Chief Academic Officers in Theological Schools: Reflections on Academic Leadership', *Theological Education*, 33 Supplement (Autumn, 1996), pp. 1-76.

3 Ann S. Ferren, Ann S. and Wilbur W. Stanton, *Leadership through Collaboration: The role of the chief academic officer* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004).

4 Jeanne P. McLean, Jeanne P. (Ed.), *Academic Leadership: A study of chief academic officers in theological schools* (St. Paul, Minn.: Saint Paul Seminary, 1998).

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another includes twenty responsibilities drawn from the literature.[5]

Faced with this plethora of expectations and demands, deans must establish priorities in order to provide leadership and preserve sanity. I want to suggest that a dean has four tasks which, if assigned priority, can provide focus in the midst of seeming chaos and can lead to fruitfulness and fulfilment in ministry.

Task 1: Recruiting and Developing Faculty

The first task of the Academic Dean is *to recruit and develop faculty who embrace and embody the ethos of the institution*. The faculty is the essence of any educational institution; it is the lives of faculty members that mark the lives of students and graduates. Long after students have forgotten the content of our lectures, for better or worse, they carry the imprint of our lives.

In that sense, the faculty *is* the curriculum. It is common to think that the curriculum of an institution is the list of courses offered. In fact, that is a misperception. The true curriculum is the faculty itself—the way faculty members pursue their scholarship, the way they handle the scriptures, the way they relate to God, the way they relate to one another, the way they relate to students, the way they relate to Christ's church, the way they relate to the lost world—this is the true curriculum of the theological school. The list of courses offered is simply a vehicle through which the values and commitments of the faculty are conveyed to students. That is not to imply the content we teach is unimportant, but to acknowledge that transformation occurs life-on-life.

In such a context, it is essential that the values and commitments of each member of the faculty be aligned with the institution's ethos. Ethos refers to the vocation, the heritage, and the core values of the theological school. Ethos is the sum of those ideals and commitments which distinguish an institution and set it apart. The president is guardian of the institutional ethos, but the dean's hands hold the levers by which ethos is conveyed to the next generation, magnified or diminished.

Alignment with ethos is the most important consideration when building or winnowing the faculty. Academic, scholarly, and ministerial qualifications for appointment to the faculty must be honoured, but never at the expense of alignment with the institution's ethos. Faculty members who do not share the institution's core values and commitments communicate a conflicting message to students and thereby undermine the institutional mission. Collins[6] has alerted us to the importance of 'getting the right people on the bus and getting the wrong people off the bus'. Nowhere is this more important than with a theological faculty, a responsibility that rests squarely with the dean.

The observation that 'the faculty is the curriculum' has a corollary: when

5 Bruess, McLean, and Sun, *'Determining Education Deans' Priorities'*.

6 Jim Collins. *Good to Great: Why some companies make the leap…and others don't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

anyone leaves the faculty or joins the faculty, the curriculum changes. Assuring alignment with the institution's ethos means the contribution of individual faculty members is enriching, rather than essential, but each one's part is important, nonetheless. The wise dean will take stock whenever there is a change in the faculty, recognizing the transition effected in the school's curriculum.

Identifying and recruiting faculty who embrace and embody the ethos of the institution is a perpetual responsibility. The goal is a stable faculty; rapid faculty turnover indicates deep problems which must be resolved. Because faculty changes cannot always be anticipated and because institutional growth generally is considered healthy, however, the dean must constantly be on the lookout for potential additions to the faculty. Broad reading and networking at professional meetings or ministry conventions may afford contacts with attractive candidates for faculty appointment, but personal interaction is needed to assure the ethos alignment that is so necessary. By emphasizing, measuring, and guarding ethos commitments early in the contact, a dean will protect oneself and the institution from unpleasant decisions later.

Each new faculty member is an investment in the future of the institution, but current faculty members comprise the curriculum of the college today. A second aspect of the dean's responsibility for strengthening the ethos of the institution, therefore, is development of the current faculty. As noted by Bright and Richards, 'It is important for the dean to work with the faculty so that they will be able to stay, will want to stay, and will make the dean glad they did.'[7]

Faculty development can and should be approached as a group endeavour, guided by the dean. If scheduled faculty meetings and annual retreats are devoted only to business, a great opportunity will be missed. A member of the faculty or a guest may be scheduled to present a topic of common interest, followed by dialogue. Alternatively, a faculty may undertake reading and discussing a book. The topic may be theological, missiological, pedagogical, or relate to the use of technology in instruction. Whatever the topic, it is important that members of the faculty recognize its relationship to their professional interests and leave with a clear sense of how the issue discussed relates to their role as scholar and teacher. The dean who includes half an hour for professional development in each faculty meeting agenda, or who allocates one day of a two-day retreat to professional development, sends a powerful message to members of the faculty about the importance of continuing professional growth.

In addition to corporate professional development programs, focused efforts with individual members of the faculty also are important. There are two areas in which faculty members typically need guidance. First, each college or seminary works with unique rhythms and expectations. Even those who have taught at other institutions

7 David F. Bright and Mary P. Richards, *The Academic Deanship: Individual careers and institutional roles* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), p 154.

need to be oriented to this college and this faculty. Pairing each new faculty member with a seasoned and caring colleague can ease this transition process.

It is a sad reality that biblical, theological, and missiological scholars are not taught to teach. Indeed, in most cases the 'masters' from whom they learned have modelled very ineffective pedagogies. To insure the success of new faculty members—and to enhance the effectiveness and fulfillment of mid-career faculty members—a pedagogical mentor is often needed. While the dean may want to undertake this, that rarely works best. The dean's role as supervisor and 'employer' easily overwhelms her or his attempt to serve as helper and guide. This is a second area in which a skilled and caring senior colleague may best be able to provide constructive guidance. It is the dean's responsibility, however, to assure that timely assistance is provided.

Finally, an important aspect of faculty development is the performance appraisal process. An annual appointment at which the dean meets individually with each member of the faculty to review the achievements and shortcomings of the previous year can provide a powerful context for affirming and encouraging personal and professional growth. To be most helpful, the performance appraisal interview should be informed by multiple streams of data. A self-assessment and report by the faculty member is essential, but student course evaluations, peer reviews, and the dean's own observations are also useful.

Occasionally the performance appraisal interview may be the context for informing a failing faculty member that he or she will not be with the college following the current year. In most cases, however, the focus of the interview will be on using the data collected to design a personal and professional development plan for the coming year. The dean's willingness to underwrite the plan with institutional resources can be very affirming for the faculty member and at the same time it establishes expectations for which the faculty member knows he or she will be held accountable.

Building and nurturing a faculty which embraces and embodies the ethos of the institution is the dean's highest priority because the faculty is the present and future curriculum of the school. By recruiting and developing a faculty of character and competence, the dean fulfills his or her first responsibility to the institution and its constituencies.

Task 2: Pursuing the Institution's Mission

The Academic Dean's second important task is to *lead the faculty in pursuit of the institution's mission*. Closely related to institutional ethos is the institution's mission, its sense of vocation and particular service to the global church. Definition of mission is a collaborative task that should engage all of the school's major stakeholders—board, faculty, administration, students, alumni, and primary constituencies (e.g., ecclesial communions and parachurch agencies). A mission statement should be succinct enough to be easily remembered and specific enough to be accountably pursued.

Although formally endorsed by the board, the institutional mission must be owned by the faculty and administration as their shared vocation.

Rewriting a mission statement is a political exercise in the best sense. It entails negotiating a shared understanding of the institution's charter, heritage, and calling, as well as its present and potential contribution to the cause of Christ. It is a project which is profitably undertaken periodically. Clarity regarding the institution's mission fosters unity in a faculty and provides direction for its work.

The programs of the school, both formal and informal, must be oriented to the institutional mission. In addition, program curricula should be assessed and adapted to the school's mission. When curricular review is scheduled, it is natural to assume the current curriculum while searching for any incremental adjustments that may be indicated. Periodically, however, it is helpful to take a fresh look, to lay aside the current curriculum, to engage anew the institutional mission, and to ask how best to pursue this mission with this generation of students. We resist asking that question since well-worn paths are comfortable and new curricula typically require developing new courses. Nevertheless, our calling is not to convenience but to pursuit of mission. Leading the faculty in this pursuit is the dean's responsibility.

Task 3: Creating a Conducive Institutional Environment

One might assume that the school campus is an environment ideally suited to the work of education, but this is not the experience of most teachers. The realities of institutional life have a way of intruding on a faculty. It is the task of the dean to assure that instructors are insulated, as much as possible, from these demands and that communication between the faculty and administrators is filtered as necessary for the benefit of each. So the third important task of the Dean is to *create an institutional environment in which the faculty is free to do its work.*

The work of a theological faculty is the formation of students for ministry. This is achieved, first of all, through modelling a life of ministry and scholarship. It is modelling which touches the lives of students most profoundly and provides credibility for instruction. Thus, institutional demands which distract members of the faculty from ministry, scholarship, and instruction must be weighed to determine their relative importance.

Nevertheless, total isolation of the faculty from the mechanisms that guide the theological school is not desirable either. Within the academy there is an expectation of shared governance which is both appropriate and wholesome. Faculty members are not just day labourers. As ministers and scholars committed to the institutional mission and values, they are major stakeholders in the life and future development of the school. In decisions that shape the institution, their voices need to be heard. Perversely, however, many faculty members are not satisfied with shared governance but crave shared administration. Thus, the dean must protect members of his or her faculty not only from unnecessary demands from administrators but also

from their own propensities toward administrative intrusion and entanglement.

Although shared governance generally is assumed, its nature is not widely understood. Governance is the exercise of prerogatives and responsibilities which pertain to delegated authority. Most public and private institutions are directed by a board, empowered by a legal authority to act on behalf of the institution's constituency and the public good. As such, governance is invested legally in the board. Thus, a board is responsible (1) to articulate the institution's core values, (2) to define its mission, (3) to make policy, (4) to appoint and hold accountable a chief executive officer, and (5) to guard stakeholders' and the public's interests.[8] A board is not legally inhibited from delegating its powers, and therein lies the opportunity for shared governance. It is important to recognize, however, that the powers pertaining to governance belong legally to the board; any delegation of those powers is a privilege extended at the pleasure of the board. Shared governance is always a privilege, never a right.

Some board powers are more amenable to delegation than others. College and university boards commonly invite their faculties to participate in identifying the school's core values and in defining the school's mission. Although major work in these areas may be delegated to a faculty, board ratification is required, acknowledging the board's legal responsibility.

Policy making, a board's third responsibility, typically is distributed between the board and the faculty. Faculty usually are delegated to frame academic policy, subject to review and adoption by the board. Thus, within the context of the institution's charter and mission, a faculty may identify which degrees should be offered and the standards for admission to and completion of those degrees. Other aspects of policy, however, must be retained entirely by the board. A faculty should not be involved in setting financial or personnel policy, for example, since this would entail conflicts of interest. These policy areas belong uniquely to the board.

If the first two areas of governance can be delegated and the third is shared, it is important to note that the last two must be retained by the board. A board cannot delegate its responsibility to appoint and hold accountable a chief executive officer, nor its duty to guard the interests of the institution's stakeholders and the larger public. In the first case, it must be clear that the executive, whether president, principal, or rector, answers to one authority, not two. The executive appoints a staff and administers the institution on behalf of the board; he or she reports to the board, not to the faculty. In the second case, only a board comprised of constituent and public representatives can be trusted to guide the institution in ways that protect both internal and external interests.

Shared governance means, therefore, that faculty members may be encouraged to debate an institution's values, mission, and academic policies, but should resist every temptation to involve themselves with the functions of executive leadership or institutional

8 John Carver, *Boards that make a Difference* (2nd ed.) (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

policy and administration. It is natural for faculty members to be interested in these things, since they are directly affected by them. Furthermore, faculties of theological schools are expected to have well honed moral sensitivities, which often touch on institutional and public life. Natural interest, however, is different from legal obligation. While faculty voices must be heard, faculty members cannot afford to become occupied with issues outside their responsibility.

While clarifying the roles of faculty and administrators is essential, negotiating the dynamics of institutional relationships can be challenging. Yates[9] observes that 'the dean is engaged in a dialectical dance between two power centers, the faculty and the president'. Wolverton and her colleagues note,

> …deans run up against an inherent conflict in the system. On the one hand, professors form a community of self-regulated scholars. On the other, presidents seek to exert institutional control directed at social change. Deans become mediators in this conflict with no clear guidelines to govern their conduct.[10]

Richey points to the importance of this dynamic. 'Your effectiveness as academic dean depends, I believe, on the success that you have in living credibly betwixt and between faculty and administration.'[11] For these reasons, deanships may be 'the most precarious positions on the seminary job chart'.[12]

That's the downside. The upside is that the dean is positioned at the fulcrum of the institutional structure. More than anyone else, she or he is able to guard the faculty from bureaucratic entanglements and translate office-speak to the faculty and academic-speak to administrators.

Weak administrators make rules; strong administrators deal with issues. That is an overstatement, to be sure; every society needs rules, whether it is a homeowners' association, a high-tech corporation, or a college campus. Since strong leaders are rare, however, regulatory policy tends to proliferate like rabbits. The knee-jerk response to every situation becomes, make a new rule. Without a strong hand on the rein, bureaucratic policy consumes everything and everyone in its path—including a faculty. The dean must be vigilant to assure that needed policies are in place but that the faculty's attention is not distracted or its work thwarted by bureaucratic demands.

In addition to his or her role as faculty guardian, the dean also functions as translator. That the worlds of academic administrators and scholar-

9 Wilson Yates, 'The art and politics of deaning', *Theological Education*, 34: 1 (Autumn, 1997), p. 88.

10 Mimi Wolverton, Walter H. Gmelch, Joni Montez, and Charles T. Nies, *The Changing Nature of the Academic Deanship* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

11 Russell E. Richey, Russell E., 'To a Candidate for Academic Leadership: A Letter', *Theological Education*, 33 Supplement (Autumn, 1996), p. 39.

12 Elizabeth C. Nordbeck, 'The once and future dean: Reflections on being a chief academic officer', *Theological Education*, 33 Supplement (Autumn, 1996), p. 30.

teachers are intertwined masks the divergent systems operative in each. Many issues which develop in the school's institutional life stem from the gap between the faculty's and the administrators' perspectives. It falls to the dean, therefore, to interpret the concerns, commitments, and fundamental good will of each to the other.

> The dean is continually playing the role of one involved in determining the flow of information. The dean provides information and interprets information as well as remaining silent, at times, regarding information that people seek…
>
> In this process the dean becomes a vital gatekeeper for the flow of information about the faculty to the president and the flow of information about the president and board to the faculty. It needs to be judicious interpretation given with fairness and deliberation.[13]

By helping members of the faculty accept and respect the boundaries inherent in shared governance, by guarding the faculty from undue demands from the school's administrative staff, and by interpreting the concerns and commitments of each to the other, the dean creates an institutional environment in which the faculty is free to do its work. This is one of the greatest services a dean can render to a faculty and to the institution at large.

Task 4: Pastoring the Faculty

Finally, a dean is privileged to *extend pastoral care to members of the theological faculty*. The culture of the western academy is not a natural medium for cultivating the qualities required for Christian ministry. The academy assumes and imposes an individualism which is very western but very non-Christian. Rather than each isolate doing his or her own work, the Bible (like most non-western societies) focuses the communal nature of human life. Christ's body is one and we are members one of another. It is the oneness of the church which testifies to Jesus as sent from the Father. The academy also assumes a competitive structure and promotes competition as motivation toward excellence. Rather than competition with one's neighbour, Christ identified loving collaboration—compassionate care, acts of kindness, and helpful deeds—as the mark of the Christian. In its most common expression, western schooling does not provide a natural context for fostering a communal and collaborative mindset.

The dean can mitigate these negative aspects of western schooling by creating an alternative culture within the faculty that fosters environments of grace and relationships of trust. Thrall and his colleagues[14] (1999) have written helpfully on the nature of Christian leadership. Acting with integrity, building trust relationships with and among members of the faculty, and extending grace to colleagues and students—living and relating 'in

13 Yates, 'The art and politics of deaning', pp. 92-93.

14 Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath, *The Ascent of a Leader: How ordinary relationships develop extraordinary character and influence* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

the Name of Jesus'[15]—are pastoral acts which nourish the spiritual life of a community.

Pastoral care also means ministering to faculty members in more direct and concrete ways. While ministerial and professorial professionalism, as well as the pressures of academic life, may inhibit close relationships among members of a faculty, a dean so inclined can touch the lives of those she or he serves. Birthdays, anniversaries, and special celebrations of faculty members and their families should find a place on the dean's calendar. The dean should be the first to know when illness, death, or crisis strikes a family within the faculty. A hospital or home visit which includes expressions of care, offers of help, an appropriate portion of scripture, and prayer will be deeply appreciated and long remembered. Such care is not a strategy toward some political end—any lack of integrity will be quickly recognized!—but a sacrifice offered first to the Lord and then to one's brother or sister.

Faculty life can be lonesome; highly competent professionals also experience times of personal need. Smith[16] has written thoughtfully about the deanship as an inner journey, but the deanship also can be a spiritual journey with others. A dean who takes seriously the pastoral care of his or her faculty will release members of the faculty to care for one another and for their students.

Conclusion

It is common for members of a faculty to express condolences to a newly appointed dean, but I see the deanship as a spiritual vocation and an institutional trust. No member of the faculty has the potential to shape the theological school's present and future ministry as does a dean. Neither the president nor any other member of the administration has the opportunity to guide, protect, and pastor the faculty as does a dean. This, above all else, is the privilege and the work of the dean.

Hudnut-Beumler speaks well when he writes,

> I would like to see other colleagues who conceived of the deanship as a means to fulfill their vocations as educators. Teaching is, after all, a privilege and so too is academic leadership. We all know that we shape minds in the classroom. What we need to remember is that with academic leadership we form the environment for that transformative educational moment. Whether good education happens or not is the product of what the teacher does and a panoply of other factors with which the dean is often much more closely involved than the professor.[17]

15 Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian leadership* (New York: Crossroads, 1989).

16 Gordon T. Smith. 'Academic administration as an inner journey', *Theological Education*, 33 Supplement (Autumn, 1996), pp. 61-70.

17 James Hudnut-Beumler, 'A new dean meets a new day in theological education', *Theological Education*, 33 Supplement (Autumn, 1996), pp. 19-20.