

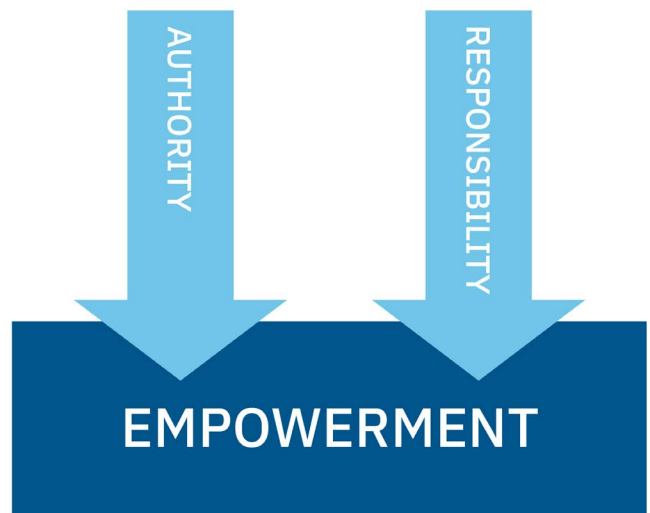
IT'S A WIN-WIN: DEAN DEVELOPMENT AND EMPOWERMENT DRIVES HIGHER INSTITUTIONAL OUTCOMES

By Jaime Ontiveros and Mike Cogan

Forward-thinking higher education leaders are taking calculated risks to transform their institutions amid increasing competition and changing demographics. The execution of these innovative plans will require more effective leadership at all levels. That's why it is critical to develop and empower a deep bench of strategic-thinking deans who maintain alignment to the institution's mission and act deliberately in the best interests of students.

Higher education executive leaders are dealing with a rapid influx of fundamental change in the industry. In order to secure the long-term viability of their institutions, they can no longer do it on their own. By supporting and developing the next level of leadership, universitywide executive leaders will be able to focus on high-level strategic planning, while allowing high-functioning deans to provide leadership in their respective areas of the institution.

This can be achieved when deans are empowered through delegated authority and responsibility to make critical data-informed decisions and, in return, be held accountable for results (or lack thereof).



Key Characteristics of Impactful Deans

Although all deans possess different skills, there are key competencies that are universal to success in this important role:



CHANGE LEADERSHIP

- Communicate effectively with diverse stakeholders
- Model and encourage positive behavior as an active sponsor
- Make informed decisions and stand by them
- Defer immediate results for long-term success



EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

- Develop relationships based on trust
- Possess strong self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses
- Understand the wants, needs and viewpoints of those around them
- Are willing and able to have difficult conversations



OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

- Understand and support institutional strategy
- Actively seek expert input (internal or external) to inform decision making
- Manage their academic portfolio and financial resources successfully
- Engage with alumni and potential donors

Deans Evolving as “CEOs” of Their Domains

As enrollment and subsequent financial pressures grow, the expectation is for deans to act as the “CEOs” (chief executive officers) of their respective areas and to have the authority that goes along with that responsibility. Historically, most deans have focused primarily on managing their teams to work effectively together. In the future, that will no longer be enough.

Many higher education institutions are making the move toward an incentive-based or decentralized budget model, and with that comes heightened expectations for deans to manage fiscal

performance, including enrollment and retention. To meet these new demands, deans must be willing to think outside the traditional confines of their roles to engage the community to solicit donations and secure new funding — a function previously reserved for the higher echelons of administration.

As these and other new competencies become more deeply embedded in deans’ everyday work (e.g., academic portfolio management, resource allocation, long-range strategic planning, etc.), it will require delegation and the development of experts within their colleges and departments. Successful deans demonstrate a willingness and commitment to educating their own teams on the inherent benefits of aligning academic priorities with the institutional mission.

Creating Accountability With Real-Time Data

The other side of dean empowerment involves increasing accountability for driving institutional outcomes. In a culture of accountability, deans have “skin in the game” and understand how their actions support (or inhibit) the institution’s ability to achieve its goals.

The key to creating accountability is ensuring that information is readily available, easy to access and reliable across the enterprise. Academic leaders who commit time and resources to technology, internal data governance and staff training prepare their deans to make smarter decisions — and create a culture of transparency around performance.

An incentive-based budget model supports this accountability by enabling administration to drill deeper into data to determine areas of strength and opportunity at the college or department level. If an individual dean is overspending, for example, there should be specific data available to support an objective, data-informed conversation with the individual.

Investing in Dean Development

Research shows that many deans are ill-equipped to maximize their impact when they first enter their new roles. The traditional path to the deanship typically spans 20 years or more, with candidates focusing the majority of their time on teaching and research, and spending limited time developing leadership and financial management skills. As a byproduct of their disciplinary focus, deans don’t normally have the requisite skills or competencies to support the broader goals of the university.

This is where an intentional development plan can make a big difference. Prospective deans need high-quality mentoring and development programs to prepare them for the rigors of formal institutional leadership, which in turn ensures optimal outcomes and the long-term viability of their institutions.

Learning how to collaborate across academic and administrative functions.

Building financial literacy to include managing finances and exploring revenue-generating opportunities.

AN EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT AND MENTORING PROGRAM COULD INCLUDE ELEMENTS SUCH AS:

Establishing metrics to document progress and using data to inform decision making.

Creating a strategic plan and building effective change leadership capabilities.

Peer-to-Peer Forums Facilitate Collaboration

Institutions may look to develop formal [peer-to-peer forums](#), sponsored by the provost, in an effort to increase transparency, facilitate collaboration and encourage networking among deans. Many organizations — including [Pennsylvania State University](#), [Arcadia University](#), [University of Maryland](#) and the [University at Buffalo](#) — hold academic leadership forums or academies for new and prospective deans.

According to a 2019 study, 44% of [employees look to their peers for answers](#) more than any other source. As in any role, there is a learning curve associated with a transition into a deanship. One of the best ways to ease the shift is by intentionally facilitating opportunities for deans to learn from other leaders within the institution as well as leaders of other organizations.

Institutional Literacy Programs Create a Path for Potential Leaders

It can be difficult for even the most tenured administrator, let alone an undergraduate student or new faculty member, to understand the complex financial underpinnings of higher education institutions.

To bridge that gap, leaders may also consider offering optional courses for anyone interested in learning more about how the enterprise is managed. This provides an opportunity for anyone who might potentially seek out a future deanship position to proactively enhance their financial and operational literacy, creating a clear path for academic leaders interested in advancing their careers.

For example, “[Inside Dartmouth’s Budget](#),” a five-session course delivered by Dartmouth College administrators, is offered annually to students, faculty and staff looking to gain a deeper understanding of the inner workings of the

institution. In today’s climate of cynicism regarding higher education and the value it provides, this level of transparency is revolutionary. Since 2014, participants in this program have come together to discuss a wide range of topics, including strategic planning, community engagement, department budgets and funding for new positions.

Empowered Deans Can Deliver Higher Results and Impact

Empowering deans is about more than professional development for a key functional role. Even more critical is the positive impact a well-developed, institutionally minded, strategic-thinking dean can have on the long-term success of a university or college.

Key Takeaways

Think differently.

Foster a culture that promotes greater transparency and accountability and gives deans the authority they need to make decisions in real time.

Plan differently.

Provide opportunities for prospective deans and other academic leaders to learn more about institutional governance before and while they are in these roles.

Act differently.

Develop and empower deans to act as full academic and administrative leaders by giving them the information, tools and support required to succeed.



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