CULTIVATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF ACADEMIC LEADERS

Implications for Administrators and Faculty

“There is a fair amount of skepticism on the part of faculty, particularly successful faculty, about the value of academic leadership.”

–Faculty Member

“We are really questioning the idea of protecting junior faculty from service… Strategically, we need to give people opportunities to show leadership and to develop their skills.”

–Administrator

By Deborah DeZure, Allyn Shaw and Julie Rojewski
With many baby boomers preparing to retire, higher education is facing an anticipated shortage of academic administrators. Compounding this challenge, many mid-career faculty are reluctant to fill these important positions, concerned that academic leadership is incompatible with work-life balance, that it detracts from their commitments to research and teaching, and that it is tantamount to “going to the dark side.” Further, administrative roles have become more complex over the past decade due to increased regulatory requirements and budget constraints.

To address this emerging problem, the authors conducted a study of factors that support and impede the development of academic leaders in order to identify effective practices.

The context for this study was a large public land-grant research university that has a long-standing program of leadership development serving both academic administrators and faculty. At the time, the institution was engaged in a five-year NSF ADVANCE grant to promote the advancement of women and under-represented groups in the STEM fields, which primed it for this work.

The research team, working in pairs, interviewed 19 unit administrators—primarily department chairs identified by associate provosts and deans as “academic leaders who are highly effective in identifying, cultivating and nurturing faculty to pursue academic leadership.” They also interviewed 16 faculty identified by deans as “tenure-system mid-career faculty who have indicated an interest in academic leadership and/or have agreed to take on informal leadership roles.” The researchers used qualitative analysis to identify themes and patterns in the 52 hours of interview transcripts.

What follows is a summary of their findings.

**Leadership Trajectories and Motivations**

**Service Roles as Critical Steppingstones**

All the academic administrators in this study had performed service and leadership roles that typically serve as critical steppingstones into administration, including:

- department- or college-advisory committee member
- curriculum- or search-committee member
- graduate program or clerkship director
- dean’s office staff
- associate, assistant, or interim chair
- officer or section leader in a disciplinary or a professional association
- faculty governance.

Although service roles are often disparaged, they are instrumental in the development of future leaders. Taking them on had enabled the administrators in this study to assess and hone their skills over time in low-risk contexts, to determine whether they enjoyed service and leadership, and to learn about the institution and how organizational work gets done.

Serving in informal roles is a “necessary if not sufficient” segue into academic administration for emergent leaders. The faculty in this study recognized that each formal and informal leadership role they had played had enhanced their leadership skills and inspired many of them to reconsider their skepticism about becoming administrators.

**Why Do it? To Serve**

When asked why they took on their formal leadership roles, most of the administrators indicated that they were initially ambivalent. Many agreed because they saw their engagement as service to their department, or it was “their turn.” Some did so because they believed, or others convinced them, that there was no one else who could or would do it. A small number of respondents said they took the role on as a defensive measure to avoid leaders who they felt would be harmful to their units.

But many pursued their positions because they enjoyed leading and felt they could do it well. Some wanted to leave their mark on their units, while others focused on their interest in nurturing talent. A few senior administrators noted that after a productive research career, either their interest in doing research had waned or their funding had dried up, and they were eager to be productive in other ways.

When asked about the benefits of taking a formal leadership role, most respondents identified the ability to make a positive difference by nurturing, empowering, and helping individuals or by addressing challenges in their units. Some described the benefit of working with different types of people, both inside and outside the department, or creating positive collaborations between faculty and administrators. Administrative roles enable them to do things they could not do as faculty. As one chair said, “It’s the ability to do good on a larger scale.”

However, a quarter of the faculty respondents indicated that they did not aspire to formal leadership roles as chairs or deans but that they would continue to participate in more informal and interim service roles. This is notable because the faculty participants were all selected because they were considered emergent leaders. One faculty respondent who had previously served as an administrator said, “I now know how the sausage is made. I have a lot less respect for it.”

**Challenges and Barriers to Pursuing Administrative Opportunities**

It “Takes You from the Things You Love”

The most frequently cited barrier to the move into administration was that it takes faculty from the things they most love about academic life: research, teaching, and students.

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For STEM researchers, the concern about the impact on their research was particularly salient: Many saw the door into administration as an exit from which there was no return to active research.

Respondents from several disciplines identified administrative roles as barriers to promotion. Another set of barriers related to demands on time, loss of control of time, and the “grinding amount of work.” As a result, work-life balance was undermined, which was particularly difficult for faculty with young children.

The Difficulty of Leading Now

Several respondents expressed concern about challenges of leading during the current economic downturn and its impact on funding for public higher education. One lure of administration had been the ability to build a program of national and international stature. But now, confronted with persistent budget cuts and the difficulty of obtaining extramural grant funds, administrators might have to downsize or even dismantle their units. This challenge is compounded by the proliferation of regulations and compliance expectations.

Redefined Relationships

For many, “the first step into management is the most difficult” because of the discomfort and stress of redefining their relationships with colleagues who may have been their close friends (or long-time adversaries). Many found it awkward and difficult to supervise and evaluate those who were once their peers.

Some noted that for all their hard work on behalf of their departments, “faculty don’t thank you for anything. You could drag it out of them – maybe.” Many discussed the loneliness they experienced and the need to establish new networks, particularly with other chairs, to overcome their isolation.

A Lack of Understanding

The pathways into leadership roles are rarely made explicit. Chairs rarely talk about what they do or how they spend their time, so few faculty have an accurate picture about what the role entails and its rewards, challenges, and requisite skills.

Once new administrators are appointed, the learning curve is steep. While the chairs interviewed appreciated the institution’s intensive orientation for new administrators and its leadership-development workshops, these were not sufficient to meet the new challenges they were facing.

Serving as associate, assistant or interim chair was helpful. As one chair explained, “There is no way I would have become chair if I had not been interim chair.”

Expectations for Dress and Behavior

Faculty participants identified barriers that administrators did not mention. These included implicit expectations for formal behavior and dress, requiring what they perceived as conformity and compliance with hierarchy:

“You have to behave yourself.”
“You lose autonomy.”
“You’re less independent.”
“If I don’t walk in with a suit, I’m not perceived as knowing as much.”
“Your tie-dyed shirts are gone and now you’re wearing a suit.”
“It is more and more formalized and buttoned up. It’s pretty off-putting.”

Some faculty made these comments humorously, but they reflected a perceived cultural divide between faculty and administrators that was a deterrent to participation.

Family and Colleagues

Family members and colleagues often actively discouraged faculty from pursuing administrative jobs. Family members were concerned primarily about workload and work-life balance. Peers asked pointed questions to explore their colleagues’ motivations: “Why would you want to do this?” Some colleagues questioned the value of leadership roles: “There is a fair amount of skepticism on the part of faculty, particularly successful faculty, about the value of academic leadership,” said one participant.

Many colleagues offered reasons why administration would be problematic, from “It will keep you from promotion” to “Are you crazy? Don’t you know that this will suck the life blood out of you?” While most of the advice reflected concern for the faculty member, at least one quoted a colleague who worried that his moving into administration would result in the loss of his research, which “would hurt the unit.”

Most Valued Traits of Leaders

There was widespread agreement about the most valued traits of leaders. “People skills” were most frequently cited. Respondents also considered communication skills (listening, speaking and writing—in that order) important, as was stature as a respected scholar in the field, which was seen as key to credibility. But there was also recognition that the skills needed to be a scholar did not necessarily align with leadership or prepare someone to be an effective leader.

Other valued traits included honesty, integrity, and the ability to hear and value multiple perspectives. Being high energy, hard working, efficient, timely, and decisive were also mentioned. Budget and financial management skills were seen as important to learn but not a prerequisite for the job.

Under-Represented Groups

There was widespread agreement that we need more women and people of color in higher education leadership. When respondents were asked whether they consider gender, race, ethnicity, age, and/or sexual orientation when thinking about the pipeline into academic leadership, most but not all...
indicated that these characteristics influence how they think about leaders.

Many respondents indicated that gender affects how leaders are viewed. One said, “I think we still live in an age when people see strong women as dangerous and unappealing. So that’s a hurdle and it is one that I think male faculty are completely blind to.”

Several of the women administrators and faculty felt that their colleagues or supervisors did not have their backs—for instance, “when women leaders are bullied by more senior male faculty.” And several women in the study had experienced sabotage by other women. A few expressed concern that some women are “set up to fail” in leadership roles.

Many women participants described their frustration in waiting to be invited to pursue leadership opportunities. They advised women to ask for such opportunities, not to wait for invitations that might not come. In units in which a faculty member may be the first woman leader, “you have to create your own model.”

Race continues to be a factor in higher education leadership. Many faculty of color have opportunities to engage in leadership, but like their female peers, they are often over-taxed in service. So they may benefit from guidance regarding how to select options that will enhance rather than undermine their careers. Many administrators of color indicated that having administrator mentors of color, in addition to disciplinary mentors, was very helpful and important.

Age often affected the belief that a person was “ready for leadership.” Younger faculty are often seen as not having sufficient authority and experience to lead a unit. Most often, “age” was a proxy for career stage. However, chronological age contributes to the bullying and harassment of younger women leaders by older white men who challenge their legitimacy and authority.

Very few respondents discussed sexual orientation as a factor in leadership. Those who did identify it affirmed that it did not affect the selection or performance of leaders in their units.

**Disciplinary Differences**

Leadership is a component of knowledge and practice in some disciplines—e.g., management and social work. Other disciplines teach skills relevant to leadership—e.g., communication, writing and rhetoric, finance, and labor negotiations. Interdisciplinary fields such as natural resources and epidemiology enable faculty to develop expertise across the disciplines and sub-disciplines, both in and outside academia. Thus, their disciplinary training enables many faculty to pursue administration with the benefit of well-developed skills and knowledge in various dimensions of leadership.

The disciplines also differ in the challenges they present to leaders. The clinical health sciences have complex financial models associated with clinics, requiring leaders to have a knowledge of finance and budget. STEM and health administrators oversee labs and regulatory compliance.

There are disciplinary differences with regard to external stakeholders that affect leadership. For example, agriculture departments interact with commodities groups, education departments engage with school districts, and professional programs respond to disciplinary accrediting bodies.

The availability and importance of external funding also varies across disciplines. Administrators in the STEM disciplines who wish to resume their research when they return to their faculty roles, for instance, may no longer have the requisite ongoing research to compete for grants in their field.

**When to Take on an Administrative Role**

Divergent views emerged on one strongly contested topic: whether it is productive at a research university to “protect” faculty from service and leadership roles until they have attained the rank of full professor. Many respondents took it as a given that faculty should not assume such roles until then—that junior faculty should be “protected,” giving them time to do the work required for promotion.

But others voiced concern that the unintended consequence of such caution is that faculty are socialized to think that leadership is not their job and not worthy of their time and effort. As one participant said, “I’m glad you are doing this study. I worry about the next generation of people at our institution because they have been raised to think that research is number one. And to some degree it is … but it’s too late after four to five years of being told not to engage.”

Or, as another put it more bluntly, “If you wait until you are full professor, the interest may be beaten out of you.”

By the time they are promoted, many faculty are not only unwilling to serve in these roles but have not developed the requisite skills to do so. One respondent commented, “As a newly tenured faculty person, you need to start taking some responsibility for how this place runs, which means you have to learn about it and see what you can do.” Another commented,

I don’t think that protecting junior faculty is doing any good, and it certainly isn’t helping the university. Part of being a faculty member is more than doing research. People who were brought up in a culture where research is most important, if they get thrown on a committee, they don’t do it well, don’t take it seriously.

One participant came to the university from a smaller institution where “they did not have the luxury of protecting early-career faculty from leadership responsibilities.” Shortly after his arrival as an associate professor, he was recognized for his excellent leadership skills and given many administrative opportunities. He felt that his leadership skills were honed from his earliest days as a faculty member and that those opportunities had served him well. For him, it was a compelling illustration of why we should engage faculty early in service and leadership roles.

This issue would benefit from a campus-wide conversation. It needs to include institutional commitments that service will not undermine faculty members’ academic futures, particularly with regard to promotion and the ability to
engage as active researchers during or after their administrative appointments.

**“GOING TO THE DARK SIDE”**

Participants were asked whether they had heard the phrase, “Going into administration is ‘going to the dark side.’” If they had, they were asked whether they agreed. All but one indicated that the phrase is widely used by their faculty colleagues, and only some of the faculty challenged it.

But what did they think the phrase meant? Their responses were characterized by the language, imagery, and affect associated with discussions of labor versus management—“It means ‘Us against Them.’” One respondent said, “Anything above the department-chair level, and even that, is suspect. It is joining forces with the devil.” One administrator described, ruefully, faculty’s perceptions of administrators: “We are all Darth Vader… and make decisions without faculty input,” selling out for power and influence.

Doubts about the intellectual merit of administrative work entered the discussion: “Administrative work is non-intellectual” and “anti-intellectual.” One participant said, “There are people who feel that once you go beyond chair, you are not faculty anymore… and that you are a traitor to your discipline.” From yet another: “There are a lot of faculty who see administrators’ only occupation is getting rid of the things that they love and cherish.”

In all, it was a damning portrait.

**HOW TO IDENTIFY, ENCOURAGE, AND CULTIVATE FUTURE LEADERS**

Hostile perceptions of administration keep many faculty from pursuing administrative roles just when we need to build a robust pipeline of academic leaders. There were, however, several suggestions regarding ways to nurture faculty interest in academic administration.

**Give Them Tasks and See How They Do**

Many participants noted that it is hard to know who will be a successful leader. Administrators can observe faculty with their colleagues and in meetings. Future leaders tend to care about the welfare of the unit: They offer suggestions, solve problems, ask questions, and value perspectives other than their own. They care about their colleagues and are “pleased when others succeed.”

Beyond that, it is often necessary to give faculty members tasks and see how they do. That is how to determine whether they are reliable and timely, follow through, and complete tasks. When faculty take on leadership roles, they typically shed their stereotypical, negative views of administration.

**See Leadership Cultivation as Part of a Leader’s Role**

The administrators in this study were selected because they were perceived as “effective at identifying, cultivating and nurturing future leaders.” Most saw this as part of their roles.

But they did not call these efforts *succession planning*, which would run counter to traditions of peer review in leader selection. Rather, their efforts were designed to support the growth of individual faculty members who express an interest in and talent for leadership.

**Ask if They Are Interested**

One simple and productive strategy was to add a question to annual performance reviews and discussions at reappointment, promotion, and tenure meetings: “Are you interested in leadership or leadership development?” Many faculty are reluctant to raise the issue because they assume their chairs will feel that a change of roles will undermine their research productivity.

One administrator approached the topic in stages, asking first, “What do you plan to do in five years?” Another commented, “I would evaluate what I know about them and talk about how leadership might fit into their personal goals; if it fit their goals, it would be easy to encourage them.”

**Encourage**

Administrators felt that being a positive role model themselves was an important way to inspire future leaders. Beyond that, they recommended directly encouraging faculty by validating their potential leadership skills. “The first thing to point out—and this is really something that needs to be pointed out—is that ‘you’d be a good leader.”

Both the administrators and faculty said that encouragement served as an important stimulus to their interest in leadership, “pointing out a potential I had that I really didn’t think I had.” Said one faculty member, “If they were recommending me, they must believe that I have the skills that are needed. So it was a confidence boost.”

The interviewed administrators opened doors, helped emerging leaders to network both on and off campus, and pointed out opportunities: “Maybe you should put your name in for this? Maybe take on a leadership role in this? … It would be very simple, not a long discussion.” Some administrators took a light touch; others were more persistent, sensing when extra encouragement might be helpful.

**Talk About Leadership**

The chairs felt that most faculty neither understand nor appreciate the work of administrators, so proactive chairs talk about leadership in department meetings. They describe what their own role entails, the skills needed in that role, and pathways into administration.

This not only affects the willingness of faculty to pursue administration—it may also improve the peer evaluations of colleagues who are doing administrative tasks. One longtime administrator said, “Colleagues sometimes don’t value the work of administration. Make sure it is acknowledged. I have overridden the recommendations of peer-review committees because I appreciate more what they [faculty who take on administrative roles] are doing that takes time and effort.” A perceived lack of rewards can be yet another disincentive to pursue leadership roles.

Many faculty assume that moving into administration would mean the end of their lives as active researchers. They need to be told that they can continue their scholarship and/
Productive Practices for Academic Leaders

• Engage in campus-wide discussions about the costs and benefits of “protecting” early- and mid-career faculty from leadership roles and responsibilities.

• Identify future leaders by observing which faculty care about their units and the institution and demonstrate leadership potential.

• At department meetings and retreats, explain what leadership roles entail and the opportunities these roles offer to nurture talent and support the work of the unit.

• Create opportunities for job shadowing.

• Describe paths into leadership and how transitions in leadership occur.

• Provide literature on leadership.

• Ask faculty at annual performance reviews and reappointment, promotion, and tenure discussions if they are interested in leadership and/or leadership development.

• Encourage faculty with leadership potential by validating their leadership skills.

• Develop college-based efforts to hone leadership skills.

• Provide faculty with financial support, if needed, or other leadership-development opportunities.

• Give more people opportunities to lead that are aligned with their talents, to see if they like and are good at it.

• Offer part-time leadership roles (10%, 20%) to enable faculty to continue their research and teaching while testing their interest and skills in leadership.

• Be a model of effective leadership—be transparent in decision-making.

• Encourage aspiring leaders to negotiate support that will enable them to maintain their research and/or teaching.

• Provide mentors for new administrators, including mentors from under-represented groups, if requested.

• Support women and faculty from under-represented groups when they are challenged.

• Expect leadership of all faculty.

Productive Practices for Faculty

• Don’t wait to be asked or invited. Let people know you are interested in leadership and leadership development.

• Observe effective leaders as role models and ineffective leaders to determine where they go awry.

• Find out the norms for leadership pathways and trajectories in your discipline, department, college, and disciplinary associations.

• Engage fully in department meetings by asking relevant questions, making suggestions, and offering to address departmental needs.

• Move strategically from department to college-wide committees, particularly unit and college advisory committees or academic governance.

• Take on leadership roles with incremental responsibilities in your professional association.

• Avail yourself of leadership-development opportunities offered by your college, institution, disciplinary association, or other higher education organizations.

• Assess your strengths and weaknesses, and be strategic in addressing the latter.

• Because knowledge of finance and budget is often important in administration, find ways to enhance your skills in this area.

• Find mentors who are able and willing to help you increase your leadership abilities and/or institutional understanding.

• Find out what you can negotiate for to enable you to continue your research or teaching if and when you pursue leadership opportunities.
or teaching by negotiating for research or teaching assistants, staff, post-docs, and mentors.

**Provide Leadership Opportunities**

Some administrators created leadership opportunities with 10, 20 and 30 percent appointments, assigning faculty low-risk, time-limited activities that enabled them to sample leadership roles. As one faculty member said, “Putting my toe in the water enabled me to see what I am good at and what I am not good at.”

Some administrators create new titles or designate “point people,” raising the status of these roles and positioning the individuals for future leadership tasks. One chair redesigned the associate chair role to rotate among faculty, enabling more people to develop leadership skills and gain knowledge of the role.

**Cover Costs**

In the medical colleges, administrators recognized that faculty attendance at leadership-development workshops reduces the clinical billing hours that support the unit and the faculty member. To motivate participants, supportive chairs covered the cost of lost billing hours. Further, they supported faculty members’ participation in medical leadership-development programs and additional degree programs (e.g., MBA, MPA, or MPH) to prepare themselves for medical school administration.

Encouraging promising faculty to move into leadership roles is not only essential for the future health of higher education—it can also open up productive new career paths. One of our respondents said, “It is the best job on campus.” Another saw it as connected to, rather than being antithetical to, the love of science that drew him into the profession: “If you love science, you get to work in so many different fields.”

And academic leaders can serve as role models for students: “We want our students to be leaders,” one respondent commented. “Well then, wouldn’t we want them to be taught by leaders?”

In the words of one participant, “Administrators are those who create the best possible world for academics. There need to be people who understand how the whole thing operates and that is not ‘Us’ against ‘Them.’ It is an enterprise for everybody.”

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**Resources**