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timeline and trends of the institution and the particular unit you will lead.

- What are their origins, proudest moments (and perhaps biggest stumbles and controversies), and evolution that led them to the point they are at now?
- Have there been major changes of direction or policy? For example, did they once focus on undergraduate teaching but now see themselves as having a research mission as well?
- Who were the "giants" — both the famously successful administrators and the utter failures — and what were their past glories and missteps?

Likewise, try to gain more insider intel about how the campus culture operates. How do people get things done — or not? Consider making phone calls or having lunch (during your house-hunting visits, for instance) with key players and peers. After accepting my current position, I reached out to senior professors in the college, and to other deans, and had a number of "what would be your advice?" conversations.

Caveat: You may think you don't need to do anything on this front because you are already a part of the campus culture. Perhaps you were an inside candidate, or the institution is your alma mater. Don't be too sure your indigenous status will make the new position simple.

First, people's behavior alters as your rank shifts. A friend told me how she became chair at a department where she had been a regular faculty member for decades — and "overnight everybody changed for the worse." Colleagues treated her differently. She had to abandon her easygoing, casual attitude in interactions with them in favor of a formal, professional one.

Second, just because you teach somewhere does not mean you know how the sausage is made behind the scenes. My friend had never before served as administrator and had to learn all the political and procedural ways and means from scratch.

Until you are in the job, you cannot fully predict what it is like to sit in the hot seat.

**Review the dashboards.** I never used that term until I became an administrator. Now as dean, I employ it daily to refer to any quantitative database, spreadsheet, chart, or graph that displays "the numbers" about my college — on the costs of updating the overhead projectors in our classrooms, the number of credit hours our online classes generate, or the total of faculty grant proposals submitted in a given year.

I have to monitor some of those dashboards daily, and others only occasionally (I'll touch on that in more detail in a future column). But all are vital to diagnosing the health of the college, and planning for its future.

Moreover — and here is one of the golden lessons I have learned on the job — all dashboards are connected. One datum affects others; no indicator stands alone. So now is the time to get acquainted with the statistical and historical threads that make up the intricate tapestry of what you will oversee.

**Do some advance planning.** It's too early to build a detailed master plan for what you want to accomplish in, say, your first five years on the job. You need a few months *in situ* to calibrate the details and webs of influence in depth.

However, you should start sketching the "must reach" metrics and "must do" actions. Some of those will be in plain relief — written into your contract. For example, many colleges (and increasingly departments) at research universities have fixed fund-raising or external-grants goals for administrators.

Other targets will be unwritten but just as crucial, and even compulsory. Say you are starting as a new chair and the dean tells you in confidence that she is dissatisfied with the mentoring of the department's tenure-track faculty, and their resulting productivity. You will be expected to improve both. Likewise, as an incoming dean, if you hear the provost mention salary compression as a major issue in your college, you can expect that will be on your agenda.

**Learn more about the people (and the factions).** During the hiring process, you already began painting a picture of who's who on the campus. Now you can start getting to know them better.

## How to Be a Dean



Academic deans are expected now more than ever to push their schools to evolve. They need to develop a vision, motivate the faculty, transform the curriculum, manage resources, and raise funds. Sometimes their jobs become even larger than that, as happened at the University of Missouri, where deans worked behind the scenes to remove the university's leader.

Then there the players who aren't visible on a chart or by a title but may be vital to your success. A colleague joining a department as chair learned that it was practically run by its secretary, as the previous academic chair had been absentee (or addled) much of the time. My colleague knew that if she planned to be a more engaged chair, she would need to build a positive working relationship with the staff. Likewise, a newly appointed dean once related how he had discovered that a particular senior professor was the "No. 1 influential" on the faculty and so made sure to actively solicit his advice even before starting the position.

**Don't commit to anything major too early.** A friend who became a vice president for research recounted how — on the day his appointment was announced (with the position not scheduled to start until five months later) — he received a long impassioned request from professors for action on a big project. Essentially their message was: "Congratulations! Help us now!" His decision would involve the allocation of several hundred thousand dollars and a near decadelong commitment to a research program he knew little about.

His first instinct, and the most prudent one, was to respond along the lines of: "Thanks for the notification. I am going to educate myself on these issues, which we can discuss in detail as soon as I have started the position. I simply don't know enough to say 'yes' or 'no' to anything now."

He was right. As I have learned after some 10 years of being an academic administrator, you should never commit to any course of action until you've had time to gather enough information and consider all the potential consequences.

On the other hand, as a new leader, some urgent task may require you to put your communication skills to immediate use. When I was preparing to start as a department head at a previous university, the development officers told me, "There are some donors you need to talk to right away because they are very worried about the future of the department." So, although not actually employed yet, I traveled to meet those donors to assure them that my priority would be to fix some of the major (and public) problems of the department.

An academic administrator's job is never done. Certainly, the higher you go, the more odd hours you will devote to your vocation. You cannot just accept a leadership post and then coast until you show up in the office. The prep starts the moment you sign the contract.

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