

INSIDE HIGHER ED

What Do Provosts and Deans Actually Do?

Their poorly defined roles have often contributed to academic and financial problems at major universities, argues Michael Bugeja.

By [Michael Bugeja](#)
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You know something is amiss when offices of the provost have to explain what they do at comprehensive universities. And what they do -- or, more specifically, what many have failed to do -- is one of myriad reasons why budget cuts are occurring at large, often public, universities across the country.

You'll find such cuts at institutions in [Connecticut](#), [Illinois](#), [Kansas](#), [Missouri](#), [Nebraska](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Texas](#) and [Wyoming](#), to name a few. Cuts are not the rule, [as *Inside Higher Ed* reported last year](#), showing modest increases last year in three-quarters of the states. But [tuition keeps rising](#), [debt keeps mounting](#) and provosts and deans are at the forefront of containing costs.

Go ahead and google "[What does a provost do?](#)" You'll find several websites trying to explain what the job at a major university actually entails.

One of my favorites is by Kerri Schuiling, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Northern Michigan University, who posted "[What Exactly Is a Provost?](#)"

"If you don't know what a provost is, you shouldn't feel bad. With the exception of people who work for a university, the term provost may be a bit of a mystery. If you check the origins of the word 'provost,' you'll find that the original definition was 'keeper of a prison' -- certainly not what a university provost is today!"

"[What is a provost?](#)" asks the provost's office at the University of Michigan, which sees fit to include the dictionary meaning before describing responsibilities of the position (and yes, "keeper of a prison" is included above "high-ranking university administrative officer"):

pro-vost *n* [ME, fr. OE *profost* & OF *provost*, fr ML *propositus*, alter. of *praepositus*, fr L, one in charge, director, fr. pp. of *praeponere* to place at the head] **1**: the chief dignitary

of a collegiate or cathedral chapter **2**: the chief magistrate of a Scottish burgh **3**: the keeper of a prison **4**: a high-ranking university administrative officer

Emory University has a similar website, titled “[What Does the Provost Do?](#)” Better still, its president, Claire Sterk, a former provost at that institution, has [a YouTube video](#) by the same title, explaining the position.

Let’s be clear about the aforementioned executive officers: I do not know them. They are probably excellent administrators. Neither am I denigrating the provost's duties, which multiplied considerably when a number of presidents appended the title "vice president for academic affairs."

That is when troubles began. The VP title delegated to provosts the primary duty of president -- to be a visionary. This also effectively removed provosts as the advocate for and titular head of the professoriate. (That role has fallen to chairs of faculty senates and unions.) In the past, it was not unusual for provosts to be at odds with presidents if professors failed to get adequate compensation or if operations -- from technology to curricula -- inflated the budget. When it did, provosts held deans responsible.

In one of the early warnings about the dual title, “[Vice President v. Provost](#),” authors Ray Maghroori and Charles Powers correctly state that “the two roles entail distinctly different and, at times, even conflicting responsibilities.”

University employees usually do not know what provosts do apart from being the voice of the administration. All too often, presidents and chancellors [with inflated salaries](#) are gallivanting across the country in university jets, fund-raising, hobnobbing with alumni and business leaders, attending athletic events, participating in educational organizations, networking with regents and legislators, and relying on vice presidents of diversity as buffers when multicultural crises arise.

Robert Sternberg, former provost and senior vice president at Oklahoma State University, and now a Cornell University professor, writes in a post subtitled “[Wanna be a provost](#),” “The role of a provost actually is somewhat ill-defined. At some level, it is whatever the president or the chancellor wants it to be. Presidents often will delegate to provosts tasks that they do not want to do or that they see as outside their skill set. So provosts need to be ready to be something of a jack-of-all-trades.”

Central administration should focus on one paramount requirement: *keeping tuition reasonable*. In this, too, many have failed. Their core strategy is begging. Beg the Legislature for funding. Beg benefactors, too. Raise tuition. Tinker with the preposterous budget model used by a growing number of institutions [called responsibility-centered management](#), which often rewards student credit hours rather than major enrollment, thereby inflating pedagogy.

Explaining the Budget Model

Here’s how the model typically works. The office of provost no longer is chiefly responsible for budget (centralized system); instead, college deans are responsible (decentralized system).

Budgets are not pegged primarily to departmental enrollment as in the past but increasingly to tuition, with revenue generated by student credit hours. That puts departments in competition with one another, duplicating efforts and courses, as explained in the article "[Your Tub or Mine](#)," leading to what one critic calls "perverse incentives, like engineering schools that want to teach English."

As a result, duplication abounds, with course catalogs expanding each year. A traditional provost would monitor that in a centralized system. However, since many provosts are expected to be visionaries instead of accountants, with systems now decentralized, the new class of deans typically hasn't a clue about accounting -- apart from relying on tuition and formulas for student credit-hour generation and, failing that, [increasing fees for just about everything](#).

With responsibility-centered management, you can balance budgets as long as tuition and fees keep rising, because costs are passed on to students registering for classes. The longer you keep students in the institution, the better for the budget, explaining in part why only 41 percent of students graduate in four years, with a quarter of them dropping out because of cost, [according to The New York Times](#).

I have been writing about this for more than a decade, advising provosts about what they can do apart from begging the Legislature or benefactors for more funds. You'll find [numerous articles](#) in *Inside Higher Ed* alone, not to mention other media outlets. Here's a quick sampling.

- "[Take Charge of Curricular Glut](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*
- "[Make Placement a Priority](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*
- "[Transparency Can Cut Costs](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*
- "[Your Role in the Debt Crisis](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*
- "[12 Ways to Survive an Economic Crisis](#)," *Inside Higher Ed*

The more we keep raising tuition, the more universities will operate on the status quo, allowing costs to rise without provosts and deans being held accountable. As a result, we will continue to confront these distressing problems:

- Rampant curricular growth because typically no one is monitoring that apart from student credit-hour production as a means to raise revenue;
- Fewer tenured professors and armies of underpaid adjuncts hired not because of expertise but to deliver the inflationary curricula;
- Longer graduation timelines and lower retention rates because convoluted curricular growth complicates the path to commencement; and
- Debt-ridden graduates (or worse, college dropouts because of cost), who will continue to pay student loans into middle age.

Defining the Dean

If you were unsure about what a provost does, you'll be perplexed at what many deans do anymore. The reason for that is simple: when a growing number of provosts stopped advocating for faculty and balancing budgets in centralized systems, they typically lost focus and/or interest

in the requisite duties of deans, especially since deans in decentralized systems often are responsible for revenue generation.

I coded the first 10 advertisements for college deans at comprehensive universities on the *Inside Higher Ed* job site, knowing in advance what I would probably find. Academic gobbledegook often associated with "vision," upon which job candidates may expound with little knowledge about institutional history, budget and strategic plans. Those parameters are set. Advertisements mostly overlooked requisite skills needed to run a complex organization, emphasizing curricular-based experience associated with enrollment management, assessment, certification, curricular streamlining, nonduplication of pedagogy and transparency -- hard metrics to measure student success, including average student debt and rates of retention, graduation and job placement.

Of the more than 50 general and specific qualifications and duties in all these ads, these were most cited: advocate for the college, communicate well, collaborate, have vision, know budgeting, raise funds, promote diversity, share governance, support research, and meet promotion and tenure requirements for full professor. Other requirements less mentioned included the ability to promote student success, engage stakeholders, support professional development, oversee promotion and tenure cases, operate a complex organization, and possess good character.

Here is a hypothetical job description for today's dean, based on advertisements for the position in colleges of arts and sciences, business, education, engineering, and social sciences:

"The successful candidate should have experience in leading a complex organization, including knowledge of budgets and fund-raising, and possess a scholarly record for appointment at the rank of tenured professor. As chief advocate for the college, the dean supports research and grantsmanship, oversees promotion and tenure, collaborates with deans across campus and shares governance, promoting diversity and communicating effectively with internal and external constituents. Above all, the dean should possess a clear vision to take the college to the next level of excellence, ensuring student success."

Only one of the position statements I reviewed at the time included specific reference to curricular expertise: Texas State University, in its search for an education college dean, required "experience in innovative curriculum development and delivery; academic program accreditation; and credentialing."

At Iowa State's Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication we go even further, posting our metrics on a [public accountability website](#). You'll find student retention rates, compared to rates of the college and university; graduation rates; placement rates; scholarship amounts; paid and unpaid internship percentages; enrollments by degree major; student course evaluation data; and median starting salaries in our disciplines.

Moreover, we have a public, online [assessment plan](#), [stand-alone diversity plan](#) and, most important, a [strategic plan for the school](#).

Every department in every college should have these metrics, and deans should be evaluated by them before any reappointment. Once upon a provost, that was *precisely* what they did.

Thus, a hypothetical job description for an effective dean might read:

“The successful candidate should have knowledge of enrollment management, accreditation and certification requirements, and outcomes assessment for continuous improvement in evaluating quality of teaching. The dean also should be aware of curriculum’s impact on budget and take steps to help chairs streamline pedagogy, improving graduation rates. A scholarly record for appointment at the rank of tenured professor is required, as well as understanding of promotion and tenure processes associated with support of faculty research and advancement.

“A dean should have exceptional interpersonal and communication skills, explaining ways to maximize resources so faculty take the initiative to increase enrollment, reduce student debt and prioritize job placement within six months of commencement. In this sense, vision is important, as is fund-raising, especially in providing professional development opportunities for faculty and scholarships for students. The dean should ensure that every department posts a stand-alone diversity, assessment and strategic plan aligned with institutional priorities and publishes metrics about enrollment, retention, placement, scholarships and other data showcasing the unit and collaborative efforts to achieve student success.”

The problem with such an advertisement is that fewer and fewer dean applicants can meet those requirements or discuss them intelligently in finalist interviews. In my travels across the country, in the role of invited consultant, it also has been my subjective experience that provosts no longer realize the cause-and-effect impact on institutional priorities of budget models based on student credit-hour generation rather than major enrollment.

Such oversights help explain why so many low-paid adjuncts have been hired to deliver the burgeoning curricula, at the expense of fewer full-time, continuing faculty members. Moreover, adjuncts teach more classes than graduate students who require tuition waivers, and that affects graduate school enrollment and faculty research. And with fewer continuing professors, and less time for research, remaining tenured faculty members have growing service obligations. That one factor alone may explain [the growing, unhappy ranks](#) of associate professors who cannot meet promotion and tenure requirements.

In sum, higher education cannot continue with these failing practices, particularly with poorly defined roles for provosts and deans. So-called [administrative bloat](#), hiring more assistant and associate provosts and deans to do basic tasks, only adds to budgetary woes. If the current situation continues, unmonitored curricular expansion due to ineffective budget models will result in skyrocketing costs, and the domino effect will worsen student debt and undermine enrollment, retention, compensation, health insurance, retirement benefits and, most important, recruitment of continuing, full-time professors whose research and teaching are paramount for institutional reputation and student success.

What do provosts and deans actually do? The answer seems to be, in too many cases, not enough where it matters.

Bio

Michael Bugeja, former director of Iowa State's Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication, teaches media ethics. He is an elected member of the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. In 2015, he won the Scripps Howard Administrator of the Year Award. These views are his own and not associated with ISU.