

■ KRISHNA S. DHIR, Feature Editor, Campbell School of Business, Berry College

Reflections on the Challenges of Being a Dean

by E. James Burton, Dean, Jennings A. Jones College of Business, Middle Tennessee State University

In his October, 2004 "A Personal Perspective 'On Deaning,'" in this publication, Dean Doyle Z. Williams of the Sam M. Walton College of Business, University of Arkansas eloquently noted the tasks of the dean of a business school. I would like to give my perspective on some of those tasks delineated by my colleague, Dean Williams. Having been a dean for just over five years, I bring a different view than Dean Williams, who has much more experience in the job.

Setting the Culture

Unless you are the founding dean of the college, any new dean, like any new CEO, steps in front of a parade that someone else organized. An organizational culture already exists. In some instances, new deans lead a charmed life and the existing culture is very much in tune with their own ideas. Such fortune allows the new dean to launch quickly and directly into necessary tasks, often with very high levels of support for those tasks. Sometimes, new deans find a culture that is not so supportive of their philosophies and a cultural change is required.

Generally, this means a cultural evolution, not a revolution. Change comes more gradually and more painfully in academic institutions than the corporate world can imagine. Unless there is a crisis (accreditation probation, financial exigency, etc.) to serve as the catalyst, change that could and likely would be a top down mandate in the business world will involve a methodical consensus building process in the academic situation.

While setting the culture is as important in the academic as it is in the business world, the process is likely to take longer and to be more like an accordion in nature—the top and the bottom both squeezing toward the middle. But, like the business world, if the dean is to lead the organization to any significant level of accomplishment, it is necessary that there be a cultural fit.

Leading the Strategic Planning

The saying "You can tell a pioneer—he is the person laying face down in the dirt with the arrows in his back" has a great deal of truth to it. It is even possible that some of those arrows have the markings of your own tribe. Leading the strategic planning process may be a bit like that. The dean has to establish a vision and a mission consistent with those of the university while still uniquely stamping the college. Calling on the shared values set into the culture, the dean has to rally the faculty to challenging goals, objectives, and measuring systems with a degree of "stretch" in them not previously experienced in the organization. A resistance to this much change may precipitate some of those arrows in the back.

Two specific things might be noted here. First is the rate of change. Academic organizations are notorious for taking extended periods of time to make what are often viewed from the outside as small and obviously needed changes. This is of great concern to me. If academe is to survive in anything resembling the form we know it today, I believe that we must learn how to change more rapidly. It is, I think, more likely that the traditional institution of



E. James Burton

became dean of the Jennings A. Jones College of Business at Middle Tennessee State University on August 1, 1999. He is a professor of accounting, holding degrees from MacMurray College (BA in economics/business), Murray State University (MBA) and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Ph.D. in accountancy). As dean, Dr. Burton has seen the reaffirmation of the Jones College's accreditation from AACSB and the awarding of additional accounting accreditation. A CPA and CFE, Dean Burton is a Regent Emeritus of the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners. He serves on numerous corporate, professional organizations, and charitable organization boards. He is a frequent speaker to professional groups on topics of ethics, fraud, and corporate governance. Married, he has two grown children and one grandchild.
eburton@mtsu.edu

academe will fail not because of bad decisions but because of an inability to make necessary decisions on a timely basis. The second thing of import deals with measurement. Academic institutions, including business schools, are coming very late to the understanding that measurement is critical to success. If you cannot measure it, you cannot be sure you are accomplishing it—whatever “it” may be. We have been very sure that teaching cannot be adequately measured. Perhaps not, but the attainment of clearly stated learning objectives can be measured. And learning is, after all, what we want to accomplish.

A good strategic plan must be based upon measurable outcomes. If it is not, it isn't a plan, it is a wish list. This type of planning is beginning to take root in higher education, and it is certainly a welcome change.

Attracting and Developing Quality Faculty

Certainly, I could spend all of the space allotted here by discussing this one topic of attracting and developing quality faculty. There is a critical shortage of qualified faculty and all the evidence suggests that the problem is going to become more acute. Nationally, we are not training enough new faculty to supply the growth in demand for services. At the same time the population of existing faculty coming to the retirement threshold is ballooning. Competition for faculty, particularly in some business fields, is becoming intense. Salaries and other perks are rising faster in business schools than in most colleges on the campus, creating some issues among faculty colleagues.

Deans have to look at their faculty mix and, perhaps, allow for changes not necessarily thought to be ideal. For example, schools may allow class sizes to increase to avoid having to hire an additional person, particularly in those most difficult disciplines. More adjunct faculty may be employed. Graduate students may be more extensively used for teaching. And, faculty from other institutions may be utilized via distance

learning technologies rather than hiring an additional person on the campus.

In addition to attracting new faculty, the expansion of knowledge makes it a constant battle to assist faculty to retain currency in their field. Faculty may want (and need) to be more specialized, decreasing the scheduling flexibility, and making classes more difficult to staff.

Many schools have historically grown their faculty to accommodate the growth of the student body. With the faculty shortage, that process is threatened. Now, the more likely approach is to rationalize the size of the student body to the available faculty, leading to a significant change in strategic planning.

Developing Quality Educational Experiences for Students

This is a place where different schools will be able to distinguish themselves. Internships, co-op experiences, study-abroad tours, executives on campus, undergraduate research requirements, language and/or cultural requirements, technology applications, and many other things might be included in a definition of quality educational experiences. There was once a time (and many of us were in school at that time) when the educational experience was basically lecture and discussion with only minor emphasis on the discussion. Professors had the knowledge and they disseminated it via a lecture. That model isn't nearly as successful (or well tolerated by students) as it once was.

Today, deans, working with faculty, must explore new means to accomplish the ends.

Enhancing Research

Required involvement in research and publication is one of the areas of greatest change in business schools over the past 25 years. Many smaller, regional schools had virtually no research or publications expectations on faculty when I started on this career path. To-

day, accredited schools and those that aspire to accreditation, have increasing expectations of research and publication by their faculty.

Deans are expected to assist faculty to enhance both the quality and the quantity of their research especially as measured by publication in reputable, refereed academic journals. This means making time and resources available to the faculty. With the shortage of faculty discussed earlier, it is easy to see that providing time to do research compounds the problems of having enough qualified faculty to cover the classroom needs. Not only does it mean time out of the classroom, it also means a need for additional resources—travel funding, computers, software, assistants and more—resources the dean must supply.

Providing the Infrastructure for Achieving Program Goals

For many schools today, a primary limiting factor is space. State-assisted institutions particularly have found it difficult to add space at the same rate they have added students. Storage spaces, closets, and classrooms have been converted into offices. Those “extra” spaces which were used for special things (i.e., labs and special centers) have been gobbled up for offices.

Computer labs, distance learning labs, mentoring and tutoring spaces, trading rooms, student professional organizations meeting rooms have been forgone or limited due to growth and the more critical need for classrooms and offices.

There are other infrastructure needs as well—internships, coops, graduate assistantships, clerical support—to name a few. In the face of budget shortfalls, these are among the budget items first to go but remain items which students and faculty look to deans to supply.

Recruiting Quality Students

As more schools have decided to limit enrollments, more have also decided to focus on admitting the highest ability students possible. Many schools whose

strategic objective has been growth are now changing to a quality focus. Determining and administering admissions standards into the business schools is new in many places. Where once the objective may have been to provide for all the students who wanted to come, now the objective is to attract the best prepared students possible for a limited number of available seats. This necessitates a significantly different mind set and different recruiting processes.

Placing Students Upon Graduation

When recruiting high-ability students, deans are often faced with questions (from the students and their parents) about the placement services offered by the college. Placement possibilities are related not only to the perceived abilities of the students but also to the connections and network of the faculty and dean. Many companies now limit the number of campuses to which they send their recruiters. There is, therefore, something of a competition to “recruit the recruiters.” The more companies one has coming to campus to recruit, the more positively the school may be viewed by those high-ability students to whom we referred. And, of course, the companies one is trying to get to recruit on the campus look to see who already recruits there. The dean may spend considerable time in this recruiting process.

Providing Outreach Programs Consistent with the School’s Mission

Some institutions place a very high emphasis on outreach programs. Others do not give this much weight at all. Where outreach programs are considered mission centric, it is most incumbent on the dean to find a qualified champion for each program and to see that the program is adequately funded, preferably from an outside or customer-based source. This is also an area that competes for faculty resources. If the program is run by or otherwise utilizes faculty, it probably means faculty time

taken away from the classroom. This compounds the faculty shortage. If the program does not require the knowledge and skills of faculty, one might wonder whether the program is appropriately tied to an academic institution.

Securing External Resources

The experience of most public institutions has been less and less support from tax-based sources over the last several years. Institutions that once described themselves as state supported are more likely to describe themselves today as state assisted. Students are being expected to pay a larger portion of the cost of going to school and the “private dollars” that once provided the margins for excellence are necessary for baseline support of operations and on-going programs.

“Public/private partnerships” is an often used phrase. Public funding for a new building will be much easier if there is a significant private donation to serve as the seed money. In some cases, the institution can not accept private money to build a new building unless there is also an endowment to fund the operations of that building.

Deans are constantly searching for funding to enhance faculty opportunities—professorships to reward the most productive faculty beyond what the institution will otherwise pay, dollars to fund research time and expenses, travel to conventions and development opportunities.

Securing external resources is fast becoming the most time consuming part of a dean’s job.

Improving the External Reputation of the School

To a large and perhaps increasing extent, the dean is the personification of the school. Alumni and employers are more likely to encounter the dean than any other single representative of the school and are, therefore, most likely to draw inferences related to the school from those encounters. The dean is responsible to give speeches at professional and civic club meetings, to attend

alumni gatherings, to have breakfast, lunch and/or dinner with employers, and always to create a positive impression of the school in the process. On the campus and in the national professional academic community, the dean is the visible representative of the school.

Chief Academic Officer

Dean Williams did not specifically mention this task but it is one I find to be extremely important and well worth discussing. Not only is the dean the chief administrative officer of the school, he or she is also the chief academic officer. This requires the dean to be current with what is happening in the various disciplines, technology changes, professional requirements, employer expectations, student expectations, accreditation agency requirements, general studies education, legislative mandates, and more. It seems to me that this was probably the core requirement upon which the function of dean was founded, but that it has systematically lost importance as the urgency of all the tasks above has increased.

Sometimes the dean has the role of facilitator/mediator with faculty, students, parents, employers, and other academic entities. Sometimes she fills the role of visionary. Whatever the role, it should always be as a champion for high standards and excellence of outcomes.

Conclusion

My great fear is that persons who are not currently deans but who think they might like to be will read this and decide that it is just not worth the effort. Dean Williams said, “I am honored to have the best job on the campus of the University of Arkansas—serving as the dean of the Sam M. Walton College of Business.” While not every school is blessed with the support of a Walton family, being the dean of a college of business is, indeed, a great job. You get to work with fantastically intelligent faculty, energetic and ambitious students, dedicated alumni and friends of

the college, supportive senior administrators, demanding professional and accrediting organizations, and superb dean colleagues on the campus and across the country. Any and every successful dean owes that success to these faculty, students, alumni, friends, administrators, organizations, and dean colleagues. And I am honored to serve as the dean of the Jennings A. Jones College of Business at Middle Tennessee State University. ■

Feature Editor Krishna S. Dhir
(706) 238-7942 or (706) 346-5066
fax: (706) 802-6728
kdhir@campbell.berry.edu

USDA research program announces 2005 awards

USDA's ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE (ERS) Program of Research on the Economics of Invasive Species Management (PREISM) is pleased to announce a competitive awards program for Fiscal 2005. ERS initiated PREISM in 2003 to address economic issues and decision making related to managing invasive species in increasingly global agricultural markets. Included are exotic crop pests and foreign livestock, poultry, zoonotic diseases, but also exotic pests or foreign diseases affecting public lands, ecosystems, or urban systems that are addressed by USDA programs. Proposals are due April 29, 2005.

In 2005, ERS is seeking proposals that focus on applied economic research and/or decision support system development that has direct implications for USDA programs, policies, and decision making concerning invasive species. Priority research areas include: (1) Institutions and Incentives for Efficient Invasive Species Prevention and Management, (2) Practical Decision Analysis for Invasive Species Management, and (3) International Dimensions of Invasive Species Management. Anticipated funding for 2005 competitive awards is approximately \$1,000,000.

Those interested in submitting proposals can find the request for proposals at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/InvasiveSpecies/>

For more information about PREISM, contact Craig Osteen (costeen@ers.usda.gov) or Donna Roberts (droberts@ers.usda.gov). ■