Becoming a Successful Dean in the Health Professions
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For many in academia, becoming a dean marks the pinnacle of a career—a pivotal accomplishment achieved after many years of advancement as a faculty member, department chair, program director, and/or assistant or associate dean. Assuming this high-level position, however, should not mean the end of one’s professional development, but rather the entry into a new stage of leadership growth to satisfy a new set of criteria for success and job satisfaction.

As a veterinary dean commented in a 2010 study, “The need for leadership training and renewal never goes away.” Recent research conducted by AAL and others has helped to define the specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for successful deanships in the contemporary environment of health professions education. Understanding these requirements can help deans identify their own developmental needs, assist institutions with selection of and programs for these top administrators, and provide guidance for those who aspire to a dean position.

The AAL Competency Model for Deans provides a conceptual framework that combines the elements of a successful deanship (Figure 1). In this model, four competency domains serve to bridge desirable personal characteristics (natural traits, preferences, intelligence, influence, and values) with the many elements of the health professions education environment (higher education, health care, community, etc.). This configuration illustrates the essential linkage between inner and outer: to be an effective dean (indeed, an effective leader at any level), one must marshal the internal resources necessary to both take account of and have an impact on the external environment.
Though often interconnected in practice, each of these competency domains reflects a particular focus. The Leadership domain includes such abilities as working with senior administration, facilitating change, managing public relations, influencing policy, possessing knowledge of health sciences education and research, and thinking strategically. The Self-Development domain covers the qualities of self-awareness, work-life balance, communication skills, decision-making style, and emotional and social intelligence. The Management domain contains expertise in negotiation, conflict and crisis management, fundraising, financial management, team building, and use of technology. The final domain acknowledges the newly appreciated area of Interprofessionalism, covering such qualities as collaborative leadership ability, knowledge of other professions and emerging models of health care, and attention to the values of interprofessional teams and collaborative education and practice.

These competency domains are based substantially on AAL’s research with osteopathic medicine, dental, and veterinary deans,2-6 the work of the Interprofessional Education Collaborative Expert Panel,7 and a study to define qualities of the successful medical school dean conducted by Rich et al.8 Areas shown in bold on the model are themes that recurred in responses to AAL’s surveys of deans regarding 1) areas in which they felt least prepared; 2)
areas in which knowledge is most important to succeed as a dean; and 3) areas associated with future challenges.

In the veterinary deans study, for instance, respondents reported feeling best prepared in the areas of curriculum and student relations—notably, the “areas in which they had gained experience as faculty”; by contrast, they reported feeling “least prepared in the areas of fundraising, interaction with other schools and groups at the parent institution, and technology applications.” When dental deans were asked about the importance of 17 knowledge areas in fulfilling their responsibilities as dean, a large majority (91.1%) selected communication as most important, followed by conflict resolution (78.6%), finance and budget (71.4%), and leadership development (69.1%). The survey of osteopathic medicine deans asked respondents to rate a list of factors by how prepared they were to address challenges in that area when they took their position. Among the areas in which they felt least prepared were fundraising, public relations, budget/financial management, and collaborating with colleges/schools/other groups at their parent institutions. These findings are broadly consistent with those identified by Rich et al. in their study of medical school deans. Their research identified the high-priority management skills as “the ability to assess the institutional environment and judge support for initiatives”; communication skills enabling one to interact with a “wide audience of students, faculty, university and hospital administrators, and community members that include civic and state legislators as well as potential benefactors”; “skills in financial stewardship and strategic planning”; and “effective management of leadership teams.”

Considering these health professions deans’ perceived needs, it is not surprising that they support an increased level of leadership training for individuals in their position. Among the dental deans, almost 90% reported having participated in leadership and/or deanship training programs of the American Dental Education Association (ADEA), and 75% said they took part in courses and classes beyond the ADEA programs. Even with this high level of involvement, 64% reported feeling there is a need for formal training beyond what currently exists with the ADEA Council of Deans. The veterinary deans also reported a high level (86%) of participation in leadership programs, although most examples they provided were general in nature rather than directed to their specific position. Perhaps as a result, 78% of those respondents agreed that a need exists for formal leadership training for veterinary deans. Similarly, the study of osteopathic medicine deans found little participation in leadership courses designed specifically for their position, while 93% agreed that a need exists for more formal leadership training.

What we know about the needs of health professions deans, along with general principles of adult learning, also points to some recommendations for the design of such leadership programs. While lectures about professional development topics may be useful to introduce critical subjects and provide summaries and conclusions, deep learning most likely will occur through assessment of and feedback on critical individual strengths, and through small-group interactions conducted in class and via videoconferences between in-person meetings. Active learning will be fostered through the use of roundtable discussions, case studies and simulations, role-playing, peer coaching and feedback, in-class presentations by participants, and practice sessions with instructor guidance. Individual assignments to be completed prior to in-class interactions might include self-study modules, online discussion boards, reading of assigned literature, reflection exercises, and projects conducted at each dean’s home institution that apply leadership principles
and practices learned in the program curriculum. Finally, establishing a relationship with a mentor (ideally, a more senior or former dean or senior administrator) and taking part in one-on-one sessions with a professional coach can help participants shape what they learn to meet their individual situations and address their needs for further growth.

As Rich et al. point out in their study of medical school deans, a universally applicable definition of successful deanship is impossible due to the distinctive qualities of each school and the individuals involved. Nevertheless, the research reported in this article suggests a set of needs and guidelines that can serve as goals and indicators of success in a leadership position two former deans defined as both “the worst of jobs” and “the best of jobs”: “a near impossible and thankless task from which any sane and reasonable person might justifiably run” and “the greatest job in the academy.”

Deans are in a position to influence people and policy in order to move their schools, the practitioners they produce, and their disciplines forward—which is why we all should be invested in supporting their success.

References:

2 Ibid.


