

Schools need to get into the business of succession planning, and not just for their own institutions, but for our community generally.

In this month's letter, Dr. Rick Valachovic, Executive Director of the American Dental Education Association, shares some observations on how we can ensure a healthy pipeline of senior administrators for academic dental institutions.



Wanted: Jack of All Trades and Master of Many

Are you ready to be a dental school dean or the director of an allied or advanced dental education program? If your answer is "no," you're not alone. What were once largely academic posts are now multifaceted positions demanding a wealth of personal and business skills, in addition to the academic ones honed during a faculty career.

Few of us start our careers thinking that someday we'll be deans or program directors, provosts or university presidents. As students, we tend to see administrators as far removed from our educational concerns. Yet those of us who have served on faculties or in administrative roles know how critical these leaders are to the entire educational enterprise. It's almost impossible to imagine carrying on our work without their support.

When 14 vacancies in dental deanships appeared last summer, many of us woke up to the importance of always thinking ahead and preparing future leaders to take the helm, especially in the realm of dental schools. I'm glad to report that there are only six such vacancies today, about the number we typically expect, but before that number rises again, I thought I'd check in with some folks who specialize in filling senior positions in academia.

Michael Baer and Stephanie Fidel are with [Isaacson, Miller](#), a national executive recruitment firm that conducts about 175 searches a year for leading universities and academic medical centers. Michael and Stephanie have personally worked on three dental school dean searches in the past three years, and they tell me that they typically receive only a handful of applications for each such position. Most candidates come through contacts they generate themselves through a network of upwards of 200 people in academic dentistry. "While most people are flattered to be called and to know that their peers consider them capable to play the role," Stephanie tells me, "not everyone is jumping at the chance to become a dean."

That may be a side effect of evolution in leadership roles. Most of us are happy in our academic positions and hesitate to become a jack-of-all-trades when we've worked so hard at mastering our current profession. Dental school deans in particular need a broad understanding of curricular issues, research, the alumni community, and higher education issues, along with the ability to interact with senior-level people within the institution and without, including donors.

According to Michael and Stephanie, faculty search committees tend to run into trouble when they focus on one or two of these areas to the exclusion of the others. To circumvent this problem, search firm recruiters work with each school to help them understand where the organization is going and how the new leader will help it get there. A series of objectives flow from this process, serving as a guide to the type of person best suited to the job.

Not surprisingly, Michael and Stephanie think a search firm adds value to the process. "Faculty often think search firms can't make judgments about quality, that they don't understand academe," says Michael, a political scientist who once served as both a dean and a university provost. "Some of us really know academia, and we know how to work with search committee members to take advantage of their knowledge of the field."

Of course, even with the best professional assistance available, the dental education community is ultimately responsible for cultivating its future leaders. ADEA does its part through the [ADEA Leadership Institute](#), a yearlong program in four distinct phases that develops the capacity of predoctoral, advanced, and allied dental faculty members to take on future leadership roles, and the [ADEA Allied Dental Faculty Leadership Development Program](#), four days of intensive leadership training especially for allied dental faculty members and program directors.

The ADEA Leadership Institute has accepted nearly 200 Fellows to date, and seven dental school deans have emerged out of this pool. A recent survey of alums revealed that a minority of participants, only 28%, have an active desire to become a higher education administrator someday. Nevertheless, the ADEA Leadership Institute attracts individuals who have the potential to be academic leaders, whatever their current professional goals. Dr. Karl Haden, director of the ADEA Leadership Institute and the President of the Academy for Academic Leadership, tells me that this year's class is once again a stellar one. They have an excellent publication record, and more than a third of them already have NIH grants.

While ADEA's leadership development programming can continue to play a vital role in cultivating future leaders, it's clear that more is needed. Perhaps most importantly, schools need to get into the business of succession planning, and not just for their own institutions, but for our community generally.

Deans and other leaders need to see themselves as members of a larger academy, the "academy of academic dentistry," as Karl so eloquently puts it. It's true that mentoring future leaders may not result in a person assuming a higher administrative position at one's home institution, but what goes around comes around, and the cross-fertilization that results is a decided plus.

Former ADEA President Ken Kalkwarf has been an exemplar in this regard. In his position as Dean of the [University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio Dental School](#), he has built a reputation for nurturing administrative talent among his faculty ranks. "I don't want to lose people," Ken tells me, "but I tell my faculty that I want everyone to be recruited. If someone else is looking to hire them, that means they've developed the excellence, expertise, and skills that are so essential to the work we do."

It's important for senior administrators to cultivate faculty for chair, dean, and program director positions, but how one does that is something of an art. Heap too many administrative responsibilities on the backs of faculty members and opportunities can quickly become burdens with the potential to derail carefully crafted academic careers. The administrative experience may be a plus, but if it takes too much time away from research, the candidate may be in a less desirable position when the time to fill a position comes around.

Nevertheless, faculty members must broaden their perspectives beyond their narrow academic foci if they are to function well in administrative roles. Ken likes to joke that as you progress, you need to learn less and less about more and more, and when you know nothing about everything, you can become the university president.

All joking aside, academic leaders need both a broad knowledge base and the mastery of many skills in order to be successful. A recent article in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) noted that deans have come to resemble college presidents by virtue of the complexity of their role. Once a largely academic function, today the dean must shoulder numerous external as well as internal responsibilities, including significant fundraising.

The findings of three deans' profiles compiled by ADEA and the Academy for Academic Leadership confirm this view. They reveal a clear trend toward deans needing more competence in the areas of financial management and fundraising. And given the current economic crisis, I have no doubt these skills will be more important than ever.

"It is startling to see how the job has changed even in the last six months," says Karl. "Most deans are looking at cuts to their budgets anywhere between 5% and 35% for the 2010 fiscal year. This represents a dramatic change, even if the federal stimulus package mitigates it somewhat."

This speaks to something that Michael at the recruitment firm told me. "Most of the potential candidates we talk to are focused on patient care or research. They don't see themselves as having become dental educators in order to raise money." Michael says that many people are also reluctant to relocate or to leave a job where they have been successful for something uncertain.

"On the other hand," he adds, "those who take it on find out they like it. They are on the cutting edge of the discipline, meeting people in the wider dental community and other disciplines. You become a problem solver in a different way, and can facilitate the advancement of the work of your colleagues." Indeed, all three surveys of sitting deans indicate that job satisfaction is quite high.

ADEA events and programs, and the informal mentoring that surrounds them, offer unparalleled opportunities to learn how to step into new leadership positions (or how to identify candidates who are ready to fill them). As Ken likes to say, if you have the communication skills, if you have the integrity, and if you know how to blend them, then people will want to follow you, and that makes you a leader. Looked at from this vantage point, there appear to be many future leaders among us.



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