Paul B. Bell, Jr., Presidential Address

45TH CCAS ANNUAL MEETING
NOVEMBER 12, 2010
New Orleans, Louisiana

To Dean or Not to Dean

To dean or not to dean: That is the question. And once having deaned, is it nobler to suffer the slings and arrows of middle management fortune and keep on deaning, or to provost, or per chance to president? Aye, there's the rub.

After I had been chosen to be the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oklahoma, my mother reminded me that I had once told her that I never wanted to be a dean. This negative view of deaning had been partly predicated on a story my mother had told me about a cousin who, for reasons that completely escaped her, had given up what, in her opinion, was a perfectly good job as a college professor, to uproot his family and drag them from place to place, first to become a department chair and later to become a dean.

Paul B. Bell, Jr.

My own decision to apply to be a dean was ultimately driven by my largely negative opinion of deans under whom I had served. During my previous 18 years as a faculty member at OU, I had seen many deans come and go – the dean's office had a virtual revolving door. They had all been hired from the outside, with the obligatory and celebratory fanfare that always accompanies the installation of the newly proclaimed transformational leader, and they all left the deanship after relatively short tenures – most to take jobs as provosts or presidents at other universities. After many years of watching this passing parade of deans, as well as provosts and presidents, I eventually concluded that their reason for coming to OU was to use us as a steppingstone to a more prestigious and higher paying job. They all came in with an agenda for change – irrespective of whether anything needed changing or not, or whether the things they proposed to change were the things that actually needed changing – but they didn't stay long enough to get anything accomplished and they usually left behind a mess that someone else had to clean up. I ultimately decided that we needed a dean who wanted to be a dean.

Now, don't get me wrong. We need good people to become provosts and presidents, and I would like to see even more former deans of arts and sciences fill these positions. Arts and sciences deans bring to higher administration both an appreciation of the central role of the liberal arts in American higher education and an understanding of the breadth and diversity of our universities that exceeds those of presidents and provosts who derive from more narrowly-focused professional colleges. I once had a provost who had been dean of a college with very technical, career-focused disciplines. Faced with pending budget cuts and the need to reduce costs, he initiated an analysis to determine which departments contributed the most to the university's financial bottom line. I remember his surprise when he discovered that the unit that produced the most tuition dollars relative to instructional costs was Sociology, with other liberal arts and sciences departments close behind. Even though he was now provost, he apparently had never previously thought about who taught all of those science, math, humanities and social science courses that his students needed as a foundation for their technical degrees and who generated all of the tuition that afforded his highly paid faculty the luxury of teaching relatively small numbers of majors.

However, the case I want to make today is that deaning does not have to be seen just as a steppingstone to something better, but rather is a worthy career in and of itself. We need dedicated, experienced, long serving career deans at our universities to provide both organizational stability and consistency of leadership. When change is necessary, we need deans who are in it for the long haul. Having to live with the consequences of the changes you bring about makes it likely that the changes will be better thought out, and designed to solve real problems.

Also, let's face it. Presidents and provosts do not run universities. If they are doing their jobs well, they simply just don't have the time. Deans run universities, with the close and essential collaboration of department chairs. Deans are true middle managers – we are located right in the middle of the organizational chart, between the students, faculty and department chairs who are below us and the provost, president and regents who are above us.

The central position of deans in the organizational chart allows us to continue to have meaningful relationships with students and faculty members. As dean I still teach the same undergraduate class that I have taught for 30 years, and I also meet regularly with student advisory and leadership groups. I also make time to meet frequently, both formally and, more importantly, informally over a lunch and at receptions with individual members of the faculty as well as the chairs and directors of the college's 27 departments, schools and interdisciplinary programs. So, I still get the chance to hear first-

hand and on a regular basis what students and faculty members are thinking and what they think they need; and I am in a position to do things directly that will help them achieve their educational and professional goals.

My position in the organizational chart also allows me to understand what the president and provost are thinking and trying to accomplish. My success as dean resides in my being able to bring the disparate and diverse goals and needs of students, faculty members, department chairs, the provost and the president into some reasonable alignment in a manner that respects everyone's aspirations even if I cannot always meet everyone's expectations. The key to making this work is to make sure that everyone feels that they are being treated with respect and dealt with fairly. I currently have the good fortune of working with a president who has a clear vision of what he wants to accomplish, but who leaves it up to me as dean to figure out how to accomplish it in a manner that respects faculty governance and the consultative process that is an important part of the academic culture. This helps generate buy-in from students and faculty and leads to a good decision-making process.

Because I know that many of you enjoy deaning and plan to keep on deaning, I want to share with you my "Ten Principles of Effective Deaning." These principles have served me well for the past 13 years and I share them in the hope that they can help you, too, become a long-serving dean. They might even help the rest of you become long-serving provosts and presidents.

Principle number one is:

1. Don't take it personally.

For me, this is the sine qua non of deaning – the essential and indispensible condition that serves as the foundation for success. You must separate yourself emotionally from your job. Deaning is something that you do. It is not who you are. After I became dean I discovered that I had many new friends. All kinds of people who had never given me the time of day now wanted to spend time with me. I realized, of course, that this newfound attention had nothing to do with me as a person, but rather with the budget, space or some other resource that I now controlled. Now, this is not a bad thing. Deans are supposed to solve problems and help people get the resources they need, not because we are wonderful people but because that is our job. After I became dean, I also discovered that there were people who felt I was being unfair to them. They filed complaints and even sued me. I had to understand that I could not take this personally either. Of course there are always people who try to make things personal – they know that they are right and if you disagree with them, don't give them the money, promotion or the space they deserve, it must be because you have something against them personally. What other explanation could there be? Yet, if you take things personally it can cloud your judgment, waste your physical and emotional energy and put you into a legally untenable position. Taking your job as dean personally can lead you into a black hole of negative energy from which you will never escape. So protect yourself and do not engage emotionally. Which leads directly to principle number two.

2. Stay within your boundaries – legal and professional.

Just as there are legal and other kinds of boundaries on our personal behavior, there are also legal and professional boundaries on our behavior as deans. My lawyers remind me and I am constantly reminding others, that as long as we are acting within the boundaries of our authority as defined by our institution's policies and procedures, we are generally protected from personal liability. It is when we act outside of those boundaries that we get into trouble. We all know colleagues who think that just because they have a Ph.D. in plant morphology or whatever, they are therefore eminently qualified to provide other members of the faculty, staff or even students with helpful psychological or personal counseling, only later to be burned when the counselee files a grievance or a law suit. Unless you have a license to practice counseling, law or medicine, you had better stick to deaning and refer people to other professionals when such help is warranted. Even if you are a licensed practitioner, don't hang your shingle outside of your dean's office. You cannot simultaneously be someone's dean and personal counselor without having a conflict of interest that is job threatening. As deans we are surrounded by boundaries that are best not crossed, lest we undermine the trust that others have placed in us to do our jobs fairly and impartially, leading to principle number three.

3. It's not about you; it's about them.

Leading is not about the leader. It is about the followers. My job as an academic manager and leader is to help others be successful – to provide them with the resources and the environment they need to achieve their goals. If the people whom I lead – be they students, faculty or staff – are successful, then I, as dean, will be successful. As dean, I may also have goals of my own that I want to accomplish – establish new programs, hire more faculty, generate more funding, build new buildings – but I know that I cannot do any of these things all by myself. I need others to be willing to take on these goals as their own and to work toward them either with me or even independently of me. Sometimes my function is just to get the ball rolling on a project; and by the time it reaches fruition, my role will have been forgotten, which is fine with me. I don't start things because I want credit. I start things because I believe they need to be done. My satisfaction comes from the accomplishment of the goal and not from the credit I receive. Your success as a leader will ultimately be measured by the success of those you lead.

Your success as a leader also may well depend on how well you follow principle number four.

4. Respect process; process is your best friend.

Processes exist to provide a level playing field, whether they are faculty evaluation processes, tenure and promotion pro-

cesses, salary increase processes, etc., etc. When the rules are the same for everybody, and you follow those rules, then you are protected against charges of being arbitrary or acting out of personal interest or motive. My institution's lawyers tell me that courts give great latitude to educational institutions to establish their own processes, and as long as we follow them and apply them to everyone equally, then we are treated by the courts with great deference. Where we get into trouble legally is when we fail to follow our own processes. If you do not like your processes, then use the appropriate processes to change your processes. But always faithfully follow whatever processes are currently in effect. This may not keep you from being sued, but it will keep you from loosing. Besides that, it is the right thing to do.

Principle number five is:

5. Be friendly, but not friends.

As dean, I try to be friendly to everybody, but I avoid being perceived as being personal friends with anyone on the faculty or staff. I have seen far too many times how a perception of cronyism can poison the atmosphere of a department, college or university. If people feel that your decisions are driven by favoritism or an agenda based on personal friendships, it will undermine the trust that is essential for a dean to be effective. Equally bad is developing a reputation as a gossip. We all know individuals on our campus who if you tell them something in the morning it will be all over campus by the afternoon. Do not let that person be you. I have seen too many examples of gossip coming back to harm the person who engaged in the gossip. Over the course of my deanship I have been told things that I will probably take to my grave. I have never broken a confidence, except when it would have been unlawful not to do so – as in the case of reports of discrimination or harassment. In these situations I always make it clear up front that I am required by law to report any allegations of harassment or discrimination to the appropriate institutional official. The fact that people know they can trust me not to repeat things, means that they are more likely to tell me things that I need to know so that I, in turn, can help them or help others. Which leads directly to principle number six.

6. Listen more than you talk.

My mother used to tell me that God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason, therefore we should listen twice as much as we talk. We learn by listening to what others have to say and not by talking. After I became dean, I met with everybody – and I mean everybody – in the college who would meet with me. I asked leading questions but mostly I just listened to whatever anyone wanted to tell me. After 13 years I am still having meetings with students, faculty members, chairs and directors in which I mostly listen. I also create multiple opportunities to interact informally with faculty and students, during which time I mostly listen to whatever they want to talk about. This is an excellent way for me to keep my finger on the pulse of the college and to judge both the overall mood and to pick up on specific concerns. Also, when there is an issue or problem that I have been called upon to solve, I like to get all of the parties involved around one table and listen to what everyone has to say. In these meetings I ask questions to guide the conversation along, but I purposefully try not to talk very much, taking notes when necessary to force myself to remain silent. Through this process I try to make sure that all points of view are expressed and that we explore all aspects of the problem at hand. I may even suggest possible options to resolve the matter. Only after listening am I ready to take the next step – whatever that step might be, including formulating a decision or identifying as yet unanswered questions that need further exploration. It is an act of vanity to think that we have acquired so much experience as deans that we now have all of the answers and no longer need to learn. Fortunately, just about the time I think I have seen it all, I find myself dealing with something that I previously never could have imagined. My advice is never jump to conclusions. The fall could be fatal.

Listening well also requires remembering well, which leads to principle number seven.

7. Rely on your notes, not your memory.

This was true even when I was younger and had a really good memory. The problem is that memory is always imperfect and deans deal with so many different things in rapid succession that without a written record of meetings and commitments, you are bound to misremember. Moreover, because their emotional investment is often greater that yours, other people's memories of the conversation they have with you will be much more vivid in their memories than it will be in yours. This is especially true of any commitments that you make to them or that they <u>think</u> you made to them. I tell people that, because of the volatility of my own memory, if my commitment isn't in writing it doesn't exist. This protects me from the inevitable unhappiness that occurs when their memory of what I committed differs from my memory. I also put into writing by memo or email any financial, space or other substantive commitments that I make to people, which I can refer to later as a way to help me fulfill those commitments. Not keeping your commitments to others is almost the worst thing that a dean can do to undermine the trust and respect of others. Good notes are also critically important for any meeting involving personnel matters, especially when you may need to recall during a deposition or hearing what someone said to you and what you said to them. I keep a bound research notebook with numbered pages in which I record all of the conversations I have with people. I am now on my 12th volume, giving me a permanent and easily searchable record of things I said months and years ago and have long since forgotten.

And should you ever feel yourself being pressured to make a commitment or a decision, remember principle number eight.

8. Time is your ally.

Have you noticed that people always want you to make instantaneous decisions? To them, of course, the solution is obvious – either just say yes to what they want or use your deanly super powers to fix their problem. After all, you are the dean and you need to be seen as being decisive, right? Wrong! Do not let someone else make their crisis your crisis! You should take as much time as necessary to gather the information you need to make an informed decision and, especially, to think before coming to a conclusion. Indeed, the more urgent the matter is for the person bringing it to your attention, the more you need to take your time and not rush to judgment. If the matter really is urgent, you may need to put other things aside and start working on it right away, but resist at all costs being forced into a hasty – and more often than not wrong – conclusion or action. If the issue is potentially a legal matter, always, always, always consult with your legal counsel. Email and other forms of instant communication, in which the implied urgency of the medium cries out for an immediate response, simply increase the risk that you will shoot from the hip and hit your own foot. If the message requires anything more than a simple "yes" or "no" answer, you should print it and compose a thoughtful answer before responding, preferably no sooner than the next day. Sometimes the best response is no response. You do not need to dip your oar into every pond and you should never respond to a provocation. Some things are best resolved by just letting time pass. And speaking of time leads to principle number nine.

9. Focus your time and energies on the coalition of the willing; spend less than 10% of your time on the unwilling and the troublemakers.

My immediate predecessor in the dean's office, who was serving as interim dean, complained to me that he was spending so much time dealing with problems that he never had the time or energy to do anything else. When I became dean, I made a promise to myself that I would focus my energies on working with people who wanted to improve the college and limit the time and emotional energy I invested in people who just wanted to complain. This is closely tied to the first principle of not taking things personally. As dean I inevitably have to deal with complaints, both informal and formal, but I try to spend only as much time on them as necessary. I try not even to think about them unless I am actively dealing with them. I reserve my physical, mental and emotional energies for working with people who want to work with me to do things that will help others be successful and make the college a better place. Which leads to the tenth and final principle.

10. You can't herd cats, but you can put out cat food.

The notion that faculty members are unherdable cats, with the implication that faculty cannot be led is simply nonsense. It mostly is an excuse for not knowing how to work with people who are self-motivated and independent. As dean I work hard at being responsive to the needs of the faculty. But sometimes I also need to lead the faculty in directions that are in the best interest of the college. The good news is that as dean I have a large cupboard of resources – money, space, time, food - that I can use to incentivize faculty members to undertake activities that I deem important. So, you may not be able to herd cats, but you can open your cupboard and put out cat food, and then watch them come running. You almost never get everyone to buy in. Cats are finicky. But once you have their attention, you can usually convince at least some of them that working on "your" project is not a bad use of their time. If you are really successful, they will come to think of "your' project as "their" project. Just devote your energies to working with the willing and keep the cat food coming.

In its 108 years' history, the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oklahoma has had 15 deans. At the end of this, my 14th year, I will be tied for second place as the longest serving dean of the college. James Buchanan, the man who previously served as dean for 14 years, was the first dean of the college, and he eventually resigned to become the University's fourth president – a position from which he was removed after a mere three years - perhaps he should have remained a dean. If I can keep deaning for two more years, I will, in my 16th year, become the longest serving arts and sciences dean in OU's history. I say this neither to brag nor to prove to you that I am unfit for higher office. I quite simply enjoy being the dean of a college of arts and sciences. I go to work every morning not knowing what the day has is store for me, and in spite of the efforts of my very capable administrative assistant to keep my calendar filled, I am always surprised – more often pleasantly than not – by what transpires during the day.

I am often asked how long I plan to continue being the dean. My answer is, "as long as I am having a good time and as long as others continue to believe that I am making a positive difference in their lives and careers."

Deaning can be an honorable and satisfying career. If you enjoy being a dean and are good at being a dean, then consider remaining a dean. Yes, there are the inevitable slings and arrows to dodge and we sometimes have to take up arms against what may seem like a sea of troubles. But, as deans of arts and sciences, we are in a unique position in our institutions to bring about positive change both in our institutions and in the lives of our students and faculty.

I wish you the same extended opportunity to serve that I have enjoyed.

Paul B. Bell, Jr . is Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and Vice Provost for Instruction, University of Oklahoma.