**Why Academic Deans Decide to Stay or Exit Their Positions**

Bill Henk, Marquette University Emeritus

Shelley Wepner, Manhattanville College

Heba Ali, Marquette University

Academic deans tend to serve terms of five years or less in their positions (Butin, 2016; Greicar, 2009; Robbins & Schmitt, 1994). This high turnover rate, combined with the various challenges of recruiting and developing new leaders from less-than-robust candidate pools (see, for example, Appadurai, 2009; DeZure, Shaw, & Rojewski, 2014; Mead-Fox, 2009), makes the longevity of deans a vital matter for higher education.

A current study, done in partnership with CCAS and ACAD, examined factors that deans consider in deciding whether to stay in or exit their roles. Understanding how these decisions are made is important because longevity is often an indicator of success, and institutions could achieve better retention of effective deans if they understand what influences their longevity and adjust accordingly. In short, we were interested in the relative impacts of an array of factors on deans’ thinking about persevering in office. We were also curious to see if these factors might affect perceptions about staying or exiting the position differently if the same factor was stated to encourage or discourage longevity. Of special interest was determining if a presumed overarching factor, *job satisfaction,* and its inverse, job dissatisfaction, held up when tested empirically. Finally, we wanted to know other factors that might be considered, and if the data collection had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some 272 deans drawn from different academic disciplines responded to an electronic survey that included demographic prompts and 52 target Likert items, split evenly between 26 factors previously associated with dean longevity in a qualitative study. Two additional open-ended items asked for input on factors that were not addressed, and one Likert item probed the COVID-19 impact possibility.

Percentages were calculated for each demographic prompt and means and standard deviations were computed for the 52 target items. Visual inspections were made of the item means to compare their influence and identify any notable trends. Exploratory factor analyses were conducted for the scales, and open coding was applied to the untapped factors data.

The gender and age breakdown of the sample was females (55%), males (45%), age 50 and over (80%), and age 65 and older (31%). The racial make-up was White (90%), Black (4%), Hispanic (3%), Asian/Pacific Islander (2%) and Other (1%). Since nearly 75% of the deans hailed from arts and sciences, analyses were done to determine if they responded to the target items similarly to all other deans, and no significant differences were noted.

One overarching factor, Job Satisfaction, consisting of multiple elements, emerged as the major contributor to deans’ reasoning about continuing their service. Likewise, job dissatisfaction, broadly defined, contributed to decisions to exit.

Two critical reasons for deans to stay in or exit their positions were: support from upper administration and support from faculty and staff. Other elements seemingly important for staying in their positions were the ability to make a noteworthy difference, joy and satisfaction in the role, and effective work with faculty and staff. By contrast, elements associated with vacating the position were a belief that one’s leadership is no longer trusted, ineffective work with faculty and staff, and diminished confidence in the institution.

Two reasons were more important for staying than exiting: still having goals to accomplish and remaining able to make a difference. Conversely, two reasons influenced exiting more so than staying: ongoing service not benefiting one’s academic unit and an unmanageable workload.

Factors deans thought should be included in the survey included: favorable and unfavorable practices and policies of upper administration, relationships with supervisors, opportunities for advancement, family needs, and changes in central administration. Some differential effects occurred for female deans, older deans, those with previous dean experience, and deans of color, although few in the sample. And lastly, the deans reported that the pandemic did not appreciably influence their responses.

The key takeaway here is that support from upper administration (Merrion, 2003) as well as faculty and staff is vital to a dean’s longevity. If deans feel satisfied with their positions because of support from both directions, which is likely a reflection of their own leadership acumen, they will endure in being effective leaders for their schools and colleges (Williams, 2017). Every effort should be made to retain them to ensure the continuity of effective academic unit leadership.

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