**Critical Friends as Strategic Sounding Boards for Academic Deans**

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Research suggests that academic deans receive limited formal training and instead essentially learn on the job, often as a baptism by fire (Hope, 2014; Ontiveros & Cogan, n.d.; Raines & Alberg, 2003; Wall, 2015). So, it is not surprising that they might stand to benefit from candid, dependable, and empathetic counsel from trustworthy colleagues, family members, and friends. These Critical Friends, colleagues at one’s institution, professionals from other organizations, or other confidantes, can help academic deans self-examine the way in which they operate and take actionable steps to realize necessary changes that would help boost their job performance and satisfaction (see, for example, Costa & Kallick, 1993; Johnson & Boyd, 2019; Loughran, & Brubaker, 2015).

The purpose of the current study, conducted in partnership with CCAS, was to learn about academic deans’ perspectives on critical friends and the role that they play as a source of continuous, personalized mentoring and professional development. The national survey gathered information about academic deans’ backgrounds, their experiences and current institutions, as well as their critical friend engagement and specific topics of consultation. Questions about experiences and institutions were open-ended to capture the widest variation.

The core of the *Academic Dean Critical Friends Survey* included four sections: deans’ reported general use of critical friends; identification of critical friends; possible topics/challenges for which academic deans sought guidance from critical friends; and the open-ended questions focused on the type of critical friends who helped the most, the nature of the help, and recommendations for engaging critical friends.

The decided majority of the 98 academic deans who completed the survey indicated that they engage with critical friends both inside and outside their institutions. Demographically, they were more likely to be White, female, in their fifties, hold doctoral degrees, and working at schools or colleges of arts and sciences at mid-sized, master’s-level public institutions within the United States. On average, they had been in their current positions for 4.7 years.

The deans’ top preferences for critical friends were their assistant/associate deans, dean colleagues, provosts, and department chairs within their own institutions. They also identified their significant other as an important sounding board outside their work environment. Their ratings of critical friends indicated that the deans were comfortable enough to engage with some number of professionals within their own institutions who either reported to them, were in the same position, or to whom they reported. On balance, they seemed to trust their colleagues at their workplace, possibly because they were likewise familiar with the institutional culture and were well known personally. These colleagues were also conveniently accessed. The high rating of their significant others also likely occurred because of proximity, trustworthiness, comfort, and convenience.

More specifically, those who already had served as deans, female deans, and deans at public institutions also regarded professionals at other institutions as important critical friends. White deans, deans with prior experience, and deans in institutions with more schools/colleges were considerably more likely to regularly engage critical friends. Open-ended comments reinforced the notion that critical friends outside the institution, especially former colleagues, selected former mentors, significant others, or friends, were the individuals who could provide them with unbiased, direct, and honest guidance, because they knew of the deans’ strengths and weaknesses. Many mentioned the importance of having dean colleagues in general as critical friends, because they understood firsthand the challenges of the job.

Personnel issues qualified as the number one topic of discussion with critical friends. Working effectively with contentious colleagues, resolving conflicts, and motivating faculty who are resistant to change were likewise selected as top issues. The opportunity to share feelings about their job represented yet another key topic of discussion, and this ability to turn to their critical friends to express their frustrations arose as a recurring theme in the open-ended responses as well. Recommendations that came from the open-ended responses for pursuing critical friends emphasized the significance of trust and shared values, so that academic deans do not fear exposing their shortcomings or insecurities.

The engagement of critical friends appears to have merit as a vital option for addressing challenges that are both chronic and sporadic, yet acute and time sensitive. Further exploration and understanding of the meaning that academic deans ascribe to the efficacy of critical friends would be a valuable next step in this line of research to identify specifically how they have involved critical friends.

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