The Evolution of a Dean

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Having spent 21 years at the University of Kansas I couldn't resist putting the word "evolution" in the title of my talk. As a biologist, a longtime teacher, and voter, one of the challenges of living in Kansas, especially after having grown up in the northeast, was to face a level of conservatism that I frankly wasn't used to. A school board that, at least temporarily, chose to deny the validity of biological evolution and eliminate it from the Kansas school curriculum was one of those challenges. Our school board at that time, however, underestimated the wisdom of the Kansas voters, and I stayed just long enough to see those who were in favor of strong science standards for Kansas children displace those who were not on the Kansas school board.

Imagine my surprise upon moving to West Lafayette, Indiana this past June only to discover that a popular and well-liked chemistry teacher in one of the local schools had managed to polarize students on the issue of creationism vs. evolution, himself strongly in favor of teaching what he calls creation science. He resigned, creating an outcry from the public, both from those who supported him and, as you might imagine, the many more who did not, in a college town such as West Lafayette.

Life as a provost since July 1 has been interesting, to say the least. When I was first appointed to the position last spring, my 21-year-old niece, a college student, was terribly excited for me. Once the initial excitement subsided, she turned to me and asked: "What's a provost?" The most frequent question I get asked on the Purdue campus, by faculty and students alike, is the same one: "What's a provost?"

Purdue hasn't had a provost in over 20 years. My predecessor's title was executive vice president for academic affairs. Purdue's president prefers the title provost. So, I've taken to answering the question about what a provost is in several ways, depending upon my audience. My standard serious answer is that the provost is the chief academic officer, reports to the president, and all the deans report to the provost. If you look the word up in the dictionary, one definition is "the keeper of a prison." Or, as some have told me, if the president of a university is hired to think for the university and the faculty are hired to work for the university, then the provost is hired to keep the president from thinking too much and the faculty from working too little.

The last four and a half months have gone by remarkably quickly. I'm on a steep learning curve, so every day brings more new information and more things to assimilate. During this time, we've completed a university strategic plan, had it approved by the board of trustees, and placed in motion an aggressive funding package that should allow us to build new facilities, add significant numbers of new faculty to the campus, and build our research capacity in major ways. Four of our deans retired on July 1 and I hired two others into the provost's office, so we have five ongoing searches for new deans and a new engineering dean beginning in January. We hired a new senior vice president for

advancement and he has reorganized our entire fund-raising operation. We hired a new vice president for information technology and he has reorganized our entire IT operation. I can't wait to see what the next four months has in store. I take vitamins every day.

The last four months have not been entirely without misfortune. I believe I speak for all of us when I say that no one has been spared the impact of the events of September 11th. Nor have we fully assessed what that impact might be yet. On September 8th I flew to Los Angeles to attend my very first meeting of the AAU provosts. On Tuesday, the 11th, within hours after the tragedy, three of us (two provosts and a provost-to-be) commandeered a Hertz rental car and set off first for Boulder, Colorado, then to Columbia, Missouri, and I finally made it back to Indiana on Friday afternoon. We organized campus memorial services, managed bomb scares, handled press releases, and dealt with campus business all by cell phones in the car. It was a remarkable trip in many ways, and the memories of that week are indelibly etched into our minds … for better or for worse. I learned a lot about my two colleagues and have tremendous respect for their intellect, their energy, and their empathy. Would we have had such an opportunity to bond under any other circumstances, I believe we all would have been happier in the long run. But provosts by nature rarely have time to look backward, and we certainly were not looking backward that week!

By contrast, the recounting of my own evolution as a dean is rather ordinary. I am asked often these days how I came to be in my current position. If students ask me this question, I know it is generally emanates from simple curiosity. If faculty ask me this question, I quickly become suspicious and am cynical enough to wonder what is motivating the question. Are they hopeful that I am not yet finished evolving and will move on soon? Are they perhaps fearful of this? Are they simply curious like the students?

If other administrators ask me this question, I can't help but wonder if they are contemplating when they themselves might occupy my position. Or perhaps they assume that the natural progression of things is such that administrators inevitably do move on, and understanding how I got here might help them understand how they too might eventually arrive at the same place.

Once you have begun the trek up the administrative ladder, no matter when you start and what your personal motivations might have been, others assume certain things. When these assumptions begin is a curious phenomenon and bears some mention as part of one's own evolution into administration.

It seemed that when I was a department chair, few assumptions were made and even fewer questions were asked. I spent three years as interim department head back in the 1980's, shortly after being promoted to associate professor and achieving tenure. I do not recommend this to anyone as the ideal way to begin an administrative career, although in retrospect, it worked exceedingly well for me.

How I got there was curious. I was volunteered by the then dean to chair our department after he, the dean, had fired our chairman. This was a department desperately in need of leadership, and in the end, I was persuaded to do it…for one year. Armed with the promise of an opportunity to recruit a senior colleague to chair the department and several junior colleagues as well, we set about finding a leader. Two years into this process we finally identified and hired an individual, who needed one more year to wrap up loose ends at his prior institution before moving to Kansas.

My first year as chair was filled with opportunities to learn from my mistakes. By the second and third years, I had learned how to juggle the administrative responsibilities with my own research and teaching. At the end of three years, I applied for a sabbatical, sat on the search committee that helped find a new dean for our College of Arts and Sciences, and was ready to return fulltime to my research, my teaching, and my graduate students.

I mention these three items, because each is significant for different reasons. The sabbatical was important to me because I needed to renew my NIH grant, finish several papers that needed to be published prior to my submission of materials for my own promotion to full professor, and it was an opportunity to leave campus so that I would not be directly in the way of our new department chair. I was happy to help him in any way that I could, but I wanted our faculty, who had come to rely upon me for solving their problems (including their personal problems in some cases), to understand that I was no longer the person who was "in charge" (as if anyone could ever be in charge of faculty).

The sabbatical turned out to be enormously successful on all fronts. The work went well, I established some lasting friendships and collaborations, and a year later my husband Ken, whom I met while on sabbatical, and I were married.

Shortly before leaving on sabbatical, the new dean of our College (some of you might know or remember Jim Muyskens who was a member of CCAS and brought me to my very first CCAS meeting) had asked if I would consider joining his office as an associate dean. I told Jim no for several reasons.

First and foremost, I was not willing to give up the sabbatical at that point. Second, in sitting on the search committee for a dean, I had learned a few things. I had read the application packets for more than 70 individuals who had applied for the job. There were only 8 or 9 women in the pool of applicants at this time, and in each case I was forced to conclude after reading their materials that they were not ready for, and in some cases may never be ready for, a deanship. Most of them at that time had been lured into administration prematurely. Most of them were arrested at the associate professor stage in their careers, with little hope of advancing further in their disciplines. Many of them had assumed more staff-level administrative positions that had provided them with little opportunity to exercise real leadership. In the end, they simply were not competitive in the pool of candidates that rose to the forefront in the search process. Had I not been part of the initial screening process, I might have questioned the selection of finalists; but this simply was not the case in 1987.

After returning from sabbatical, I had occasion to have lunch again with Jim Muyskens. His young tenure as our dean was going very well. He had restructured the dean's office so that the associate deans that he planned to hire would have line responsibilities for clusters of departments and programs. They would be making real decisions, about real resource allocations, and he was looking to build a team. He asked me again to join his team, this time to manage all of the science and math departments.

I consulted with my fiancé, my graduate students, my family, and within a week had agreed. I had gained enormous satisfaction as department chair, helping my colleagues both build a department and solve our collective problems, and the chance to do this on a larger scale seemed like an exciting opportunity. Moreover, my papers for promotion to full professor were in order and would be submitted simultaneous with my assuming this new role.

I spent 11 years in the dean's office at the University of Kansas. I wouldn't trade those years for anything and in fact I look back on much of what happened during those years as superb preparation for where I find myself today.

However, I had always assumed that I would retire at Kansas, and indeed retiring as dean held a great deal of appeal for me, despite the fact that this will obviously not be the case.

I am occasionally asked if I have this grand life plan, and now I'm asked a lot if I plan to be a university president. I never planned any of the major career opportunities that I have had, but I have always had the courage to try new things and walk through open doors. And to do this often takes more courage than brains.

I am the daughter of an immigrant father who never had the opportunity to finish high school let alone think about college and a mother who grew up in Indiana and who just barely finished high school before running off to New York City to live and work. I was the first child in any part of my family to go to college, and it wasn't until I had spent several years in college that a young professor, with whom I was working on several research projects, persuaded me to consider graduate school and life in academia.

As a graduate student and young assistant professor I was taught that administrators and thus administration were bad. These were endeavors usually pursued by those who weren't any good at teaching and research … failed scholars. Get them away from students and put them into administration where they will only frustrate faculty periodically and have little opportunity to do real harm.

It took some time for me to understand how wrong this view was. As universities and colleges have become more complex and more open to public scrutiny over the years, it has become increasingly more important to place highly credible leaders in the positions of power within your institutions. To do any less could well lead to disaster in today's uncertain economy. With acute shortages of resources and increasingly more demand for what we have to deliver, it takes great skill to keep institutions like ours moving forward. Failed scholars as administrators will only lead to large-scale institutional failures.

John F. Kennedy stated it very well when he said that there is great risk involved in taking action, but there is far more risk involved in inaction. Indecisive or ineffective leadership in these times puts our institutions at great risk.

Let me return however to other's expectations of you. Those of you who are associate deans and who are doing a good job are no doubt already being asked directly (or this is being whispered behind your back) when you will assume a deanship. Deans are being asked when they will become a provost. And trust me on this one, provosts are being asked when they will move into a presidency. Is it any wonder the average tenure of a dean or provost is less than 5 years. From the day we assume the position of dean or provost, again assuming we show signs of being successful, our colleagues not only make the assumptions that we will be moving on, but many of them are nominating us for that "next position" all over the country.

Many will indeed be relieved when you finally move on, but then they haven't seen who your replacement might be! Will it be a micromanager, a screamer, or an eccentric with unusual speech and/or eating habits? The possibilities are boundless, and the simple truth is that you won't know until the next person is in place and you've had a chance to live with them for awhile.

Let's turn now to what your personal expectations might be. I've just spoken about what everyone else's expectations are for you … they assume you are doing this only as a stepping stone to the next position. They will badger you about this periodically in seemingly innocuous ways, only to be able to say I told you so when an opportunity comes along that you really truly cannot pass up. In some ways they encourage you to make this a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is a certain smugness about them when you fulfill their ambitions.

But what has motivated you? If you like helping others, if you enjoy new challenges every day; if you aren't afraid to make decisions; if you truly enjoy helping your faculty and students achieve special honors and recognition, knowing that you yourself are unlikely to receive much personal special recognition; if you are basically an optimistic person; if you enjoy uncertainty and can deal with the fact that often an outcome to a situation would not be the one you would choose; if you are a social person who enjoys sharing a strong vision of the institution you work at with the public, your trustees, your alums, and your state legislators; if you can deal patiently with an endless array of agendas (often not your own) without becoming cross or condescending; if you don't mind repeating yourself over and over and over again; if you like being around smart people; if you like building teams; if you enjoy stretching your intellect and your energy; and if you enjoy always working with limited resources but with unlimited vision, knowing that what you do can and will have enormous positive impact on thousands of young and not-so-young lives; then you will love administration, at any level.

However, if you need personal recognition; if you have a hard time not taking credit for every success within the institution; if you spend endless hours worrying about the fine details; if you cannot delegate and trust others to help you; then administration will not be an enjoyable experience for you.

So much for motivation. Each of you knows how you got here, and I would be shocked if some parts of my lists don't also appear on your own list of reasons for how you ended up here today. I have known a few over the years who craved the title, the money, the glory associated with these very public jobs. Most of these individuals were either sorely disappointed or frightened or both by the reality of their lives as administrators. The truth is that the further up the administrative ladder you move, the more lonely your life will become.

Think about what happened when you took that first step toward the "dark side." How many of your faculty colleagues had also been your friends, and how many of them today remain your friends? How many have never tried to lobby you, appropriately or inappropriately, for something on their personal agenda? How many have indulged in offering you advice, unsolicited, on some aspect of administration that only they have special insight into?

Having spent 21 years at Kansas, 15 of those prior to assuming the deanship there, I knew a few of the faculty. In fact, I knew most of the faculty. And yet it never ceased to amaze me and my staff when a faculty member would initiate an end-run around their department head, around their associate dean, directly to the dean or directly to the provost to report on some form of egregious behavior, often attributable to a colleague, their department chair, or maybe even their associate dean or dean. Do they think we don't talk to each other?

Or how about the department chair who gives one version of an incident to your associate dean, another to you, and a third to the provost. All designed to deflect blame from the original source of the problem (themselves, their department, or a colleague within their department), often onto the associate dean, the dean, or even the provost. Alas, what indeed has happened to personal responsibility, and do they really, really think we don't talk to each other???!!

Of course, life in administration is never dull. Consider the students. Early in my career as a teacher of freshman in an introductory biology course, I had some interesting experiences. One morning in class, following my lecture on human reproduction and contraception, a young woman approached me after class, with a very concerned look on her face. I asked her if I could help her and she said yes; she had a question. Her question was: how long does it take to get pregnant? I paused for a significant period, frankly puzzled, before asking her what had prompted the question. She proceeded to explain that she had been living with her boyfriend for the past 6 months and last week his old girlfriend had turned up claiming to be 3 months pregnant. I stopped her at that point and explained that if the old girlfriend was indeed 3 months pregnant and if he was indeed the father, then they had had sexual intercourse 3 months ago. Her response was "I thought so!" and I chose not to follow up on the outcome.

As associate dean I would often have to field phone calls or respond to letters from students and/or parents. Usually, there was a problem. Occasionally there was a compliment. But most often some aspect of academic policy needed to be conveyed to the student or the parent following some unhappy outcome or behavioral incident. For example, one morning I spent the better part of an hour on the phone with a father who had just seen his son's final transcript, the son having graduated the preceding spring. He wanted his money back for the math class his son had taken as a freshman. His son had had to take the remedial math class for which he got no college credit. Having seen no credit on the transcript, the father was outraged that we had charged money for this. Now, four years later, he wanted his money back. He had already talked to the registrar, his son's advisor, the department chair, and he was none too happy to have to deal with a mere associate dean. Mostly I listened and then I explained. Dad did not get his money back.

Mostly you do a lot of listening in these jobs. You may not always like what you hear, but you spend goodly periods of time in meetings, and it is often in your best interest to listen, and listen carefully. Your turn to speak always comes, and whether it's questions and answers, a speech, an informal conversation, or a casual exchange of ideas, others will listen to what you have to say.

I had to get used to the idea that as dean, and even more so now as provost, people listen to what you have to say. I like to kid around, and now I have to be certain that people know when in fact I'm joking. For a long time, I've known that at each stage in my life I've both had role models around me and have also served as a role model. Role models can be either positive or negative. I've learned important lessons from both kinds; but I work hard to be the positive kind.

As a woman, trained as a biologist, beginning back in the late 60's, it never occurred to me that women couldn't or didn't do certain things. As a sophomore, my advisor told me it would be inappropriate to follow my initial passion for field biology. Women just didn't do that sort of thing. If I really wanted to be a biologist, then try

something more laboratory oriented and less field oriented. He was old school; fortunately, my undergraduate research advisor was a young professor who never considered there would be things I couldn't or shouldn't do simply because I was a woman. I earned an undergraduate degree in zoology.

My first experience in graduate school, coincidentally at Purdue University, was a near disaster. First day on campus, I and more than 20 other young women graduate students were individually told by the biology graduate advisor that none of us (the women) were expected to succeed. Purdue was in danger of losing NIH funding if they (the biology department) didn't accept more women, so there we were. For most of us, we were there not for long. I completed a master's degree and fled to another institution to complete the Ph.D. My close friends know I said I'd never go back to Purdue, so I guess I'm living proof that you should never say never.

At Kansas I was the first woman ever to be dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; at Purdue I am the first woman to hold the position of provost. To quote a song from my generation: the times they certainly are a'changing.

I'm frequently asked if I mind being referred to as the first woman whatever; if it matters to me. Of course it matters! And while I may not show it, I'm privately very proud of being a change agent, of helping to remove barriers that had previously existed, and of rising to the challenge to excel in one's job. It's true that women coming up before me and coincident with me faced different issues and different challenges than women today, and most of us had primarily men as role models and mentors. Most of us who have achieved some modicum of success can tell tales like those I've just conveyed. Many of us had to adjust or accommodate to attitudes that today could lead to lawsuits, grievances, or, at the very least, profound discouragement.

Many of us simply didn't think much about it. We just found other ways to achieve our goals. We had help. None of us got here alone. For me, there were so many fine people who have helped me. My undergraduate advisor, John Just at the University of Kentucky, my graduate advisor Joe Bagnara at the University of Arizona, Jim Muyskens, my friend, former boss and now colleague in the University of Georgia system, my former associate deans Beverly Sypher, Rob Weaver, and Carl Strikwerda, as well as Erin Spiridigliozzi, all here today, and all of whom were instrumental in whatever success I enjoyed as dean; Ernie Peck and Dick Hopkins before him and past and present members of the board, all good friends. And my most special friend, colleague and partner in all things, my husband Ken who is here today. I counted on these people and they never disappointed me.

I thank you all for inviting me back here today, one last time, thus bringing closure to my 11-year tenure first as associate dean and then dean. Following in the tradition of many before me, I was unable to complete my tenure as president of CCAS because on July 1 I became a provost. And thus following in the fine tradition of those who perpetrated similar disruptions upon CCAS prior to me, I was promptly kicked out of CCAS! This is the most important organization for arts and sciences deans. I encourage each and every one of you to get involved in CCAS. I am enormously grateful for the opportunity I have had to be a part of its history. Thank you!