

What Do Deans Do?

The academic deanship is the least studied and most misunderstood position in the academy.
(Gmelch, Wolverton, Wolverton, & Sarros, 1999)

I have often been asked that question by people outside the university community and sometimes by those within the university. When I became Dean (here I refer to deans of academic colleges like arts and sciences, business, and education as opposed to deans of honors colleges or graduate colleges) five years ago, I am not sure that I could have fully answered that question. However, I now believe the answer to fall into five general categories.

- Enhancing student success
- Supporting faculty performance
- Managing resources
- Obtaining resources
- Representing the College and University

The more effective the Dean is in each area, the more successful the College and University is likely to be.

Enhancing Student Success

A major goal of the university is to recruit, retain, and graduate students so that the education they receive improves their lives and society in general. A Dean should focus substantial resources on achieving this goal. Recruiting the ‘right’ students to the College is essential, but then those students must be retained within the university community until they complete their degree and are prepared for meaningful employment. Achieving this goal requires a focus of college resources especially quality teaching and advising.

Student success is enhanced when instruction is meaningful, internships include valuable real-world experiences, and technology is state-of-the-art. Opportunities for scholarships and support must be available to enhance student opportunity.

Supporting Faculty Performance

Hiring and retaining the ‘right’ faculty is essential but supporting faculty performance goes far beyond that. Young faculty need mentoring into academic life to learn how departments are governed, how to obtain resources, how to improve teaching, how to advise students, and many other skills. Department Chairs and more senior faculty play important roles in this process but must have resources to use to achieve success.

Managing Resources

The College Dean is allocated resources (e.g., faculty and staff salaries, operating funds, renovation funds) to run the College. These funds must be used wisely to promote student and faculty success in teaching, research, and service for the Departments and students.

Obtaining Resources

Resources may come from state allocations (for public universities), student tuition and fees, gifts, and grants/contracts. The Dean provides support for faculty to obtain grants and contracts and must be active with alumni and donors in obtaining gifts. Grants and contracts often support all aspects of the College while gifts typically support student scholarships, endowed faculty lines, and other special programs.

Representing the College and University

The Dean must effectively represent the College (and all of its stakeholders) and University both internally and externally. Internally includes other Deans, Provost, President, other university administrators, and special groups. Externally means to outside groups (e.g., other universities, government agencies, public schools, community groups) as well as to alumni and friends. The Dean must always promote the College and have its best interest in mind.

Reference for quote: Gmelch, W.H., Wolverton, M., Wolverton, M.L., & Sarros, J.C. (1999). The academic dean: An imperiled species searching for balance. *Research in Higher Education*, 40, 717-740.

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