What’s a Dean to Do?
by Cathy A. Trower, Research Director

After recently addressing a group of academic deans about the barriers to interdisciplinary scholarship and changes needed to overcome them, a dean asked, “But what’s a dean to do? We are seen as middle meddlers!” He elaborated by saying that it’s difficult to manage or affect change from the decanal vantage point because of the organizational hierarchy and power structure; there’s a provost and president above him and senior, department chairs and tenured faculty in various departments around him.

Since that question was posed to me, I’ve met with several academic administrators and here is what I have learned about what deans can do to affect change on any issue, whether it is promoting interdisciplinary scholarship and supporting such scholars for success, increasing the numbers, status, and success of women in STEM disciplines and of faculty of color, or creating a great place to work for pre-tenure faculty. I hope these suggestions will prove helpful for COACHE member institutions as they focus on the issues related to faculty recruitment, retention and development on their campuses as uncovered by the COACHE Survey.

Focus attention.
Most issues have low salience for most people most of the time. In addition, there are always multiple concerns on college campuses and all too often the ‘crisis de jure’ can distract us from persistent, systemic problems. Deans can help focus the attention of faculty and other administrators by spending time, over time, on the issue upon which s/he wishes to influence.

Gather data.
Deans are in a prime position to call attention to issues or problems by bringing data to bear on them. Research shows that what gets measured gets done. In some cases, the data are quantitative and in others help will come in the form of stories and anecdotes. In any case, marshal the evidence to make the case.

Engage colleagues up, down, and across campus.
Build alliances with other deans by discussing areas of mutual concern, defining the problems, and thinking of possible solutions. Involve the faculty in those conversations. One administrator with whom I spoke said that he plans to form an Advisory Task Force of key senior faculty to figure out how to make progress recruiting and retaining scholars of color. Take the ideas to the provost; in other words, make your best case and make it known that you have support on multiple fronts. Offer solutions not more problems.

Don’t accept the status quo.
Some decisions in academic institutions are made by accretion and just because one’s proposal is rejected today does not mean that it will not be accepted later. Deans can persist until progress, even incremental, is made. An effective strategy is not only to anticipate the costs of policy implementation (e.g., modified duties, flextime, stop-the-clock, dual career hires), but also to discuss the cost of maintaining the status quo.
Ask questions.
Instead of feeling the need to have all the answers all of the time, pose questions in a variety of forums where you already have people's attention. As one dean said to me, “I lead by asking relevant questions at a variety of tables with various constituencies. Most often, those questions have no easy answers but I am able to put the issue effectively into play. Raising issues as questions puts academics in a mindset of problem solving. This is, after all, how we all approach our own scholarship – with questions, not with answers.”

Clarify.
One reason some problems persist is because the issues get fuzzy over time and as they come up in multiple venues. Deans can help ensure action on stubborn problems through clarity: determine a definition and stick with it (e.g., what we mean by interdisciplinarity); list barriers to change (e.g., the reward structure; the locus of tenure in a department rather than an institute, center, or program); and delineate specific ways to overcome each individual barrier.

Use carrots and sticks.
As an equestrian friend once said to me, “When I want to lead my horse, carrots work. When I want him to turn around, I need a stick.” Most of us prefer carrots to sticks, but some deans also use sticks effectively by turning back search pools that lack diverse candidates or withholding funds from unproductive departments.

Hold departments accountable.
One way that corporations have made progress on diversifying the workforce is by holding managers accountable for setting and achieving goals. Rewards flow to successful departments and are withheld from those which are not making an effort.

Involve department heads/chairs.
Department heads and chairs sit in pivotal positions in academic departments and can do a great deal to preserve the status quo or produce change in departmental culture. Seek their buy-in and commitment.

Garner resources.
The deans I spoke with were most effective when their solutions went from pooling resources across divisions and schools to becoming a part of the university budget – funded by the central administration.

This briefing was written to offer several ideas rather than to present a silver bullet; as we all know, there is no such thing. The point is to try the things that work for you and fit well within your institutional and departmental cultures. In that regard, an old saw comes to mind, “Remember, what doesn’t work on you will not work for you!”

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