

The Best Job(s) in the University

The remarks below formed the basis of an invited presentation on leadership at a retreat of Memorial University directors in the summer of 2007.

It's a treat to return to the Wilds, where I've spent many productive hours with some of you before. I also welcome returning to the matter of leadership, a main topic of at least one previous retreat.

Though we don't always focus on the fact, leadership is a key virtue in the academic profession. We're expected to lead our students to knowledge of a discipline. We aspire to leadership in our research specialization. And if you've read my article in the materials for this retreat,¹ you'll know my argument for the leadership of service.

For most of *you* the leadership of service looms very large. You exercise it when you help colleagues be leaders in teaching, research and the informal service we depend on to make our community work effectively and happily. In the background of my reflections today is the thought that you in *formal* leadership positions find that such willing colleagues help make your jobs great ones to have.

These reflections will take the form of a memoir. They're a set of recollections on being captured in the administrative eddies of a university. Once in administration it can be difficult to escape, but as you know it's a good fate. I offer you some highlights of my capture without apology, for the business of administration is honorable. It can cost you in some ways, but it doesn't cost us our souls. As I know from experience here's a scenario you shouldn't have to worry about.

DILBERT



My story includes a number of maxims that reflect my experience. They may not all be right for you, but I'll offer some thoughts on preparation, motivation and qualification for leadership. I'll then go on to explain why I think you should be happy doing what you're doing. Throughout this I'll try to apply lessons from Dilbert, including this one:

¹ "The Leadership of Service," *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 2 (2004), 199-207



I'll keep it brief.

Here's another lesson:

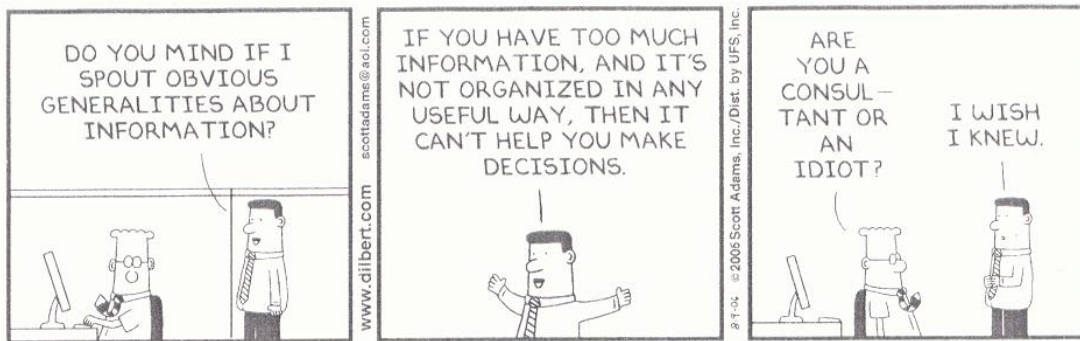


I'll try not to give you cause to tune out.

Preparation for leadership

How often have we heard that universities are notoriously inept at training people for academic administration? After all, learning how an organization works isn't part of a graduate-school education. I sometimes say that *my* qualities as an administrator were shaped by my philosophical training, but there aren't enough places in philosophy programs to serve the need.

Actually, I suspect that *most* organizations are poor at succession planning and leadership training, but there may be a particular problem for universities. We academics are trained to be critical. We're good at finding fault and have the academic freedom to find fault cuttingly. This seems as right to us as to Dilbert:



In most organizations, though, respect for colleagues and civility are necessary for proper functioning.

This leads to my first maxim: Administrators and potential administrators should be encouraged to take part in another organization. Search committees should look with favour on participation in external associations, whether it's a matter of military service, volunteer work, or political action.

My organization was the NDP. For 5 years I was Treasurer in Ontario. I learned to read a balance sheet and limit expenditures to revenues. But my most important lessons had to do with managing ideological battles. I often disagreed deeply with “the crazies,” but argument never succeeded unless it was conducted with respect. Of course, every maxim has exceptions. Sometimes the gloves had to come off, but one learns when to do that too.

Motivation for leadership: How often I've heard people – especially new heads – say, “It's my turn...” Hearing this makes me suspect that a unit is too small to function reliably. It may also warn of a tendency to be rigidly democratic, that is, to let the majority determine direction rather than working to shape that majority. Good leaders make proposals and convince their colleagues – or if unsuccessful try something else rather than simply go along.

I prefer to hear someone say “I can do that job as well or better than anyone else.” Rather than ego, that shows interest in doing a job well. Even better to hear is, “I was asked.” To be encouraged by colleagues to preside over their collective affairs lets *their* judgments influence your motivation; and collective judgments about people are usually pretty good.

Qualifications for leadership: I'll offer you three. (1) The first goes without further emphasis. It is instinctive appreciation of Dilbert's school of management and mismanagement. Since part of this retreat is about budgets, I must offer you this:



Let's call this qualification a sense of humour.

(2) Next comes the ability to recognize a good idea. *Vision* is important but it doesn't have to originate with you. *Persuasion* is important, but you don't want to force your ideas on the uncomprehending masses. That may even work for some, but a far surer means of improvement is listening carefully for those gems of insight that can almost sell themselves. You will, of course, hear more if you give credit where credit is due, in contrast to this scenario:



(3) I want to commend one final qualification. It's the ability to find the balance between two natural partners: leadership and teamwork. Unless heads, deans and VPs understand the equal merit of championing their unit on the one hand and supporting the institution as a whole on the other, they're going to be flawed leaders. They won't only be most annoying to work with but may do more damage than good. Happily for me, my experience in this connection was almost wholly positive.

I think I can assume that Memorial's formal leaders are properly prepared, highly motivated and well qualified, but for what? Indulge me as I recollect the jobs of head, dean and vice-president.

The Job of Head

I spoke earlier of philosophical training as a preparation for leadership, but of course that was in jest. I'm *not* joking when I say that the job of department head was the best one I ever had. True, I sometimes say this to encourage heads who feel besieged, but it should be absolutely true. There's always a host of rewarding things that can be done and fun to do when you're responsible for the basic academic unit above the individual professor. Let me illustrate with some examples that I remember with the greatest pleasure. If at least some of you find at least one good idea here, it won't be a waste of time.

When I became head, graduate enrolments in the department had tanked, with costs to our prestige and faculty entitlements. What to do? Well, a key to enrolments is inquiries that can be converted into applications, so we made it easy to inquire by adding reply cards to our advertising brochures. Registrations tripled in two years. We did something similar about our pitiful number of majors. I got from professors a list of the five most promising students in their first and second year classes and sent them all a letter, inviting them to *consider* a Philosophy program. The response was great, enrolments grew and we gained new faculty positions.

As part of the recruitment program we looked at our academic focus. The department was pretty featureless, but we saw an opportunity to build bridges between two solitudes in Philosophy. Thanks in part to a conference I had time to organize because of teaching remissions, the department became well known for connecting analytical and Continental philosophy, a daring thing in the 1980s.

The influx of graduate students made it possible to solidify our community. One of our most successful and enduring initiatives was to delegate responsibility for the visiting speakers program to the graduate students. They made the choices, issued the invitations and ran the sessions. It all benefited their professional development and broadened the department's collegiality.

With collegiality comes power. When I spoke earlier of collaboration I didn't mean appeasement. The Philosophy Department inhabited lovely quarters in the University's original academic building, with huge offices and various amenities. The building was an irresistible target for a growing administration that announced its takeover as part of a planning exercise. The other department in the building (Religious Studies) agreed to resist and we contacted friends and alumni, asking them to express their displeasure at administrative schemes overriding academic purposes. After a couple of months the administration announced, "University Hall will remain a primarily academic building." It was a great victory.

This job was the most academically productive time of my career. The trade off of some teaching against administration gave me more time to write. Among other things I published the proceedings of the conference that helped the department to reshape itself. Of course, that was then. Two decades later and several provinces to the east, heads may no longer have the luxuries I describe, but I'll to come back to that.

The job of dean (or “deanlet”)

Being dean of my faculty was probably my second best job. There were some major minuses. Much more time had to be given to administration. My scholarly writing diminished and teaching had to be cut back to one class a year. (Parenthetically, I believed then, and I believe now, that leadership should be expected in all dimensions of an administrator’s work, implying that deans and directors should get into the classroom every year.)

The single greatest difference between being a head and being a dean is that higher office brings greater authority. This may seem obvious, but it was a surprising discovery for me. More than once I was astonished to hear colleagues say of projects I was promoting, “if the dean wants it, it will happen.” Some of you may also find that hard to believe, but your office does bring power. If you listen well and seek advice, colleagues are remarkably ready to assent to the ideas you want to run with. Here are a few examples:

I inherited some very small departments. They could never find heads or recycled them every few years after they’d become bored with the job. The departments were art, drama and music, all performance-based disciplines. It took two years of discussion, but they decided to merge into the School of the Arts, with a much stronger academic presence in the Faculty and a larger pool of potential administrative talent.

I was an early adopter of e-mail, and it was easy to get heads to communicate in this medium; but the newest members of Faculty suggested some larger designs. We established what was at that time the only full-time academic position in Canada devoted to humanities computing. The Director of Humanities Computing was responsible for teaching in this appealing area, developing modern teaching labs, and encouraging creation of materials for students to further their knowledge through self-directed study.

Curriculum development generally was one of my chief interests. Thanks to a measure of faculty renewal, interdisciplinary opportunities were easy to identify. We began a popular program in Communications Studies, and courses in Applied Humanities courses enabled senior students to participate in faculty members’ research, find co-op placements and become instructional assistants as part of their academic programs.

My administrative team and I did some other useful things. We advertised student-centeredness by physically integrating the offices of the dean and the associate dean for programs. We also stressed community-centeredness through an Advisory Council to promote “town-and-gown” communication and seek tangible support from external sponsors.

Deans typically feel they have no money for initiatives. I certainly felt that. My response was to begin putting every undesignated donation into a new faculty endowment. There was resistance from the Development Office, of course, but now all faculties at Mac have development officers charged with similar tasks. I’m very pleased to see MUN catching up.

I mention resistance, and I was a little pushy. My VP and I had a strained relationship. It leads me to two further maxims. First, respect authority, but don't kow tow to it. Second, depend on those who know you. When it came to my renewal the VP said, "There was no question when I heard what they had to say about you." She wrote me a recommendation to Memorial. I assume it was a good one.

The job of Vice-President (Academic)

Oddly, the position of VP (Academic) doesn't have much to do with academic programming, which comes from heads and deans. I'll say least about this job because it's least generally relevant, but it *will* lead to the last message I hope to leave with you.

I can't say that the job of VP was among the best I ever had. Its demands largely obliterated opportunities for teaching and research. In five years I taught only ½ course and published only a couple of articles. But there *were* compensating satisfactions that I take pleasure in recalling. They include

- Working with deans and directors who have great affection for the institution
- Leadership sessions like this one (I hope they're now a tradition)
- A strategic *framework* for the University (a good exercise in collegial planning)
- Academic Program Review (a fundamental modernization of the university)
- The program that has become TOGA (promising a modernization still coming)
- Course evaluations (not really my doing, but I was able to support the reform)
- The Leslie Harris Centre (which I first proposed at a retreat like this)
- Reformed dean's lists

The last of these was a pleasant surprise. It wasn't easy to get the schools and faculties to surrender local control in favour of University-wide criteria of superior academic performance. It took a couple of years to get there, but we gained coherence and saw collegiality at its best. So the VP's job can also be pretty good. There is little more satisfying than the sense one is contributing to improvement.

In saying this and in recounting my history, I have to be aware that in some respects the account seems to describe a vanished golden age. I'm not sure that that the job of head still provides a good balance of teaching, research and service. From every quarter I hear lamentations from officers of the university, faculties and departments that there's just too much to do. The 10-hour academic day and the 6-day week have disappeared.



However, one of the inspiring moments of my time as Vice-President came during a retreat on this very problem. One of the themes of the retreat was the question, “Why are We Working So Hard, and What Can We Do about It?” After half an hour of complaints, conversation turned to solutions. The academic leadership present realized that it needed to *take* leadership. Deans and directors started making plans to assert themselves. They began to make presentations to the Board. They designed further leadership sessions. They demonstrated how competitors can profit from collaboration and provided a model for the future different from Dilbert’s.



President

For obvious reasons these reflections haven’t touched upon the paramount position of leadership. Still, I’ve had the opportunity to work with more than one university president closely and can’t report much evidence that the job is among the best a university has to offer. Certainly, the demands on a chief executive are different from those on the chief *academic* officer of a university, faculty or department.

There’s no question, though, that the way executive authority is exercised has an impact on the satisfactions of academic leadership positions. As Memorial approaches a change of president, therefore, vice-presidents, deans and heads have a lot to consider. If there is *any* time when deans and heads should reclaim leadership, this is it.

You should be thinking hard about the qualities Memorial needs in its next president and the matters you identify as priorities for attention. You have influence. You should use it, making sure that the search committee appreciates the needs *you* are best placed to define.

- What are the main challenges to be faced in the next 5 years?
- What parts of the new strategic plan should seriously guide our actions?
- Should we be more vigorously building an endowment?
- Are we/should we be committed to internationalization?
- Do we have the right balance of student-centeredness and research intensity?
- Do we have the right balance between tenured and casual instructors?
- Do we need to fight Blackberry and cell-phone addictions more effectively?
- Does morale on the campus(es) need improving (and if so how)?
- Should leadership and teamwork be more strongly encouraged?
- Are we maintaining our focus on the client or becoming like Wally?



Don't look to Dilbert for answers.



Memorial University is a fine institution. As MUNFA has rightly insisted, there are good reasons for ensuring that it more than fair to middlin', but it depends upon your leadership. I hope you will continue to cultivate it and thank you for letting me join you on this occasion.