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The Dean's Toolkit

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Introduction: (Speaking Notes)

As Academic Administrators, it appears sometimes that we are in constant hiring mode, if not a faculty, then an administrative staff, and if not, then a technical staff. And if not for one of our direct units, we also sit on other hiring committees across the institution – sometime to assist a Faculty, sometime in the hope that it will pay back.

Our society is extremely mobile, it is a fluid environment, and a competitive one – the good news for us is that working in Arts, Craft and Design in Higher Ed. is quite attractive as it can provide some job security. We also live in a culture of immediacy and we want result now, and have less and less patience to invest, to build for the long-term. When it was quite common to have Deans for 15, 20 years (or even longer), this is now becoming rarer (probably due to a combination of various factors such as: workload, expectations, pressures, results now, etc.).

So maybe the best way to start the conversation is to provide (or remind us) some of the contextual pieces and realities we all deal with. The focus of these notes will be on the hiring of academic staff and is divided into 3 simple parts: The Before – the During and the After.....

Before - Context #1: New Hire – An institutional perspective

At the Program level:
(Chair's level)

Understandably, the focus is more on teaching skills, or the promises of teaching abilities (in the case of junior faculty) and the background as expressed by a CV and the portfolio (there is somewhat a belief, that a good visual arts portfolio, or an interesting thesis will make a good teacher – not always the case; which always begs the question: what do you need

to put in place to assist, nurture, and help those young faculty grow? I have seen that part often falling by the way side.

At the Faculty Level:
(Dean's levels)

At the Dean's level, the focus is starting to shift towards Scholarly Research and Creative activities and their potential contribution to the unit, as we see research dollars, publications and the likes as adding to the reputation of the unit.

This happens on 2 fronts: reputation vis-à-vis other units in the institution (we have to deserve to be the favorite one so we can then get the bigger slice of the resources pie (we hope) – a.k.a. the “jewel in the crown” syndrome). And external reputation vis-à-vis similar (and competing?) disciplines, as it may have an impact on student and faculty recruitment. A challenge for the Dean is that some programs have a tendency to hire their own or their clones (as there is always the fear of the unknown). In a not so distant past, at Art/Craft/Design institutions the proportion of hires that came out of the same institution was traditionally than for other disciplines. Ironically, for programs that are about pushing boundaries, there is sometimes an incredible amount of insularity manifested. As we do not know what we do not know, part of the Dean's responsibilities is to - I believe, ensure that a broader approach is at least undertaken.

At the Institution's level:
(Provosts, Presidents)

At the institution's level, the focus shifts even more towards reputation enhancement and academic growth potential opportunities. The main focus for Presidents is generally around notions of reputation enhancement, simply because enhancing the reputation of the institution will bring more donors, better students, better recognition, better faculty and staff, etc.

As a president I assume that the unit has taken care of evaluating the teaching abilities, the quality of the portfolio, and the value of the research that the proposed successful candidate has undertaken and/or is interested in. I am now much more interested in how this individual can fit in the larger strategic picture as we evolve and transform our institution.

The challenge can then be that disconnect between a hire at the unit level and its relation to the institution continuous transformation/evolution.

My advice here is that as Deans, to be able to contextualize the faculty hire in the larger strategic vision of the institution is a definite asset. You telling me you need a faculty to teach such and such courses is fine –

actually I do not need to know as I will assume that is the basis for the hire, however I need to know how this will fit with our future plans and what new opportunities may come around because of that particular hire.

During - Context #2: The hiring game:

- The traditional approach has been and for the most part still is: “You announce the position and they will come”.
 - o Basically, a group of individuals gets together, iron out what they think the characteristics of the position should be - hopefully checks with HR that everything is okay and advertises the position (Chronicle of Higher education and other means such as discipline’s listserv). You may even send a letter to colleagues at other institutions for them to pass it along (which they generally do to faculty they are trying to get rid of – maybe...) and then happily you wait to be flooded with amazing CVs. The group then gets together again, filters the CVs and comes up with a short list and interviews happen and out of this voila! You have your chosen one. Then you go into negotiation – hoping that the individual is so happy to get a job that will accept quickly what you are offering him/her. The interesting thing is that this has worked for many many years.

- However this raises several questions that we need to consider in this “game”:
 - o Who and what are you really looking for, and how this will fit with the plans of the department, the school, the faculty and the institution (as these are not always in agreement with each other (and they probably should)? We often cast a wide net to ensure a broader pool of applicants, at the same time the lack of clarity can make the final selection challenging and may come down to personality fit rather than strategic fit.

 - o Is reading a cover letter (which hopefully address the fit issue), a CV, a portfolio, followed by ½ to a full day of interviews enough to tell you about a 20 to 25 years possible investment? There is a gamble component here that is quite interesting.

 - o What is it that you are offering that is unique? If what you advertise is like everyone else, just change the name and location, are you going to get everyone and not necessarily THE one? And please, advertising that you are the best program, well everybody seems to be the best these days.
To that end, I strongly encourage you to further develop the key elements that define your uniqueness. These often can be found in the ideology behind the teaching and curricular approach, they are also found in the sense of place – basically how do you fit within your geographic area...

Frankly, everyone pretty much claims they are the best and programs and institutions will prove it to you by listing quite quickly on their main website the list of famous alumni that came out of the institution. What they fail to “commodify” (as Jeremy Rifkin would put it) is all the not so famous individuals that have very successfully moved forward with their lives and with the problem solving, the analytical skills we have provided them.

- We now live in a very competitive world, and what I am finding is that you actually have to seek the individual you want rather than wait for it to come to you. If someone is good at what they do, unless something majors is happening at their own institution, they are not necessarily looking at moving (especially if they have a young family), One of the best roles that head hunters perform, when you think about it, is that they have a license to contact folks that are not necessarily looking for jobs - and often the recipient is quite flattered to be contacted. Now these services are quite expensive, depending on the position the fees can go from 20% of the annual salary to 40%. For most of us this is rarely feasible for faculty positions. So you as Deans, as Chairs, as faculty, you have to live up to the name of the Search Committee, you need to go search. That is the shift I have seen going on the last 12 or so years. It comes down to the need to be proactive. One possible way is to identify the individuals at other institutions that you may wish to have at your own institution and then to court them. If your Provost and President are attending a conference that may have such an individual you are interested in, have them introduce the institution to them. A possible (and efficient) way to start the “courting dance”, is to regularly offer workshops, conferences, symposium at your institution so you can bring these folks to your neck of the woods, and maybe your President will throw a dinner for them (presidents generally love doing that). That may help you make these folks feel desired. And if you can make them feel wanted, you are ½ way there. It also will enhance the reputation of your unit and the institution – and presidents love that even more... Advice here is to use your President and Provost more effectively in your recruitment process (might also be useful if the individual wants a higher salary than what your budget has, and they might be more inclined to find for you the additional resources?).

After - Context #3: The Dean’s role:

5 points I will touch on here:

- I encourage you to put in place a system that provides some support, outside of the traditional main frame of institutional support (such as PD funds..). Ask new faculty to develop a Scholarly Research and Creative activities plan (maybe one that is aligned to their tenure-track years) – as I have seen more often than I expected, faculty coming up for tenure that are not always ready (often along the way they have lost track of what they wanted or needed to do?).

- More importantly: Protect junior faculty from themselves and their department. These folks are full of energy, passion, dreams and hopes and do not necessarily know how to say no. I am not trying to pit Dean's against Chairs, I am simply trying to highlight here a key responsibility that Deans must have because if not you, who?
- With new faculty, because of the new perspectives they will bring, and how they might look at the department, the school, the Faculty and the institution, before they get too much into the "borg collective", you have an amazing opportunity to learn about issues in your environment and think strategically about addressing those. It will also make those new folks quickly feeling good about how they can contribute and how they are valued by the institution (creates good allies that you may rely on later).
- As we seem to all live in short cycles, 5-year academic plan, 1-year budget plan, undisclosed capital plan (3 to 5 years generally) etc. But as we all know, in academia, things often take much longer to change, evolve and move forward (with lots of meetings in-between...). As Deans we often live in the 5-year time frame, as a President my timeframe is 20 to 25 years, even though I will not be there. So going back to hiring faculty being a 20 to 25 year investment, I encourage you to think these hires within a 20 to 25 strategic context – that is when transformational “events” really happen.
- And lastly, you need to become Paradigm Pioneers (will be the most difficult part of the job) because there are lots (I mean really a lot) of resistances to change in academia...
Think about it this way: We now all pretty much live in a non-sustainable system. Academia the way it has developed, is based for the most part on the German technical university which was establish to support the German industrial university, which in turn was based on the medieval university model that is discipline based. That part of the context we live in is where too often inflationary pressures to PSI outpace revenues, and this obviously is a long-term recipe for disaster. We are seeing mergers and closures, albeit small institutions, happening more and more... So the paradigm pioneering for a Dean is how do you shift from a collection of specialists to a collection of generalists that will be able to move into a much more fluid learning and teaching environment where flexibility is the mantra? Our students are engaging the world in totally different ways, they are coming to higher ed. with different sets of tools, and the technological changes (the 8-month cycle) are putting so many pressures on PSI that we are falling more and more behind. For a long time, the fastest growing undergraduate major was the undeclared major. Students want to have access to everything at any time (culture of immediacy) and our (dated) academic structure is not really good at quickly (and nimbly) responding to this fast-pace evolution. So how you navigate this new paradigm will be key to your sustainability.