



Training Your Replacement

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At the Faculty Leadership Institute in June 2011, a large number of the attendees were brand new academic senate presidents. Energetic, enthusiastic, and eager, many found the tasks and knowledge they needed to bring to their new position to be overwhelming. Some had at least one year of shadowing the previous senate president as president-elect. Others had served years ago and hoped to refresh their skills and update their knowledge. And still others found themselves elected and taking office with little mentoring or assistance from the previous presidents. If we wish for new faculty leaders to be effective immediately, they need to be cultivated and trained before they take office.

Many of us have found ourselves or our senates in an uncomfortable position at some point—the current leader wishes to or must step aside, but no good candidate for replacement is immediately available. Indeed, the same scenario occurs not only with senates, but also with other faculty leadership positions: curriculum committee chair, department head, and others. In order to ensure a smoother and more effective transition from one leader to the next, and to ensure to the greatest extent possible that the person taking over the position is prepared and ready for the job, we must take a thoughtful, carefully planned approach to the issue.

An example of this situation arose recently at Long Beach City College (LBCC). The terms for academic senate president at LBCC follow the same pattern as those of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges: one year terms with a limit of two consecutive terms. In Spring 2011 the faculty at LBCC found themselves in a familiar position: the sitting president was no longer planning to continue, and no readily apparent candidates who were both willing and prepared to take on the assignment were forthcoming.

Finally, a former LBCC academic senate president stepped forward and agreed to take on the job again, but with a specific purpose in mind: while she was in office, she and other senate leaders would make a conscious effort to bring new members onto the local executive committee in order to help ensure that in the future the faculty would have a clearer and better trained set of candidates for the presidency. As a result, when the fall semester began five of the seven elected positions on the executive committee were filled by newly elected individuals who had not served on the committee previously.

This action by a local academic senate president is one that many faculty leaders might be well advised to imitate in some form. As new, continuing, and former senate presidents take their positions in the upcoming academic year, we are reminded that in these times, with the budget issues, 1440 degrees, the student success initiatives, repeatability concerns, and a myriad of local issues, effective leadership transition and the grooming of new leaders is essential.

THINK AHEAD

We should not wait until we need a new president or chair to consider who that person should be. Doing so often leaves us at best with a new leader who is untrained or underprepared and at worst with no willing and capable candidate at all. Instead, we should identify those who have the potential to lead and provide them with the proper opportunities and experience to help them succeed when their time comes to take command.

Not all members on any executive committee, local or statewide, will eventually serve as the overall leader. Such a situation is in no way a negative: not everyone wants to be the president, and some people are more effective in support roles or behind the scenes than in front of the room. However, if you look around at your senate leadership and see no one who seems a likely candidate for the presidency, then you do have a problem.

Senates need to think long term regarding leadership in order to make certain that potential leaders have been identified and are receiving the necessary experience to prepare them for greater responsibilities. If all members of the senate or faculty leadership—executive committee members, chairs of major sub-committees, and others—have held the positions for extended periods and show no interest in moving into higher positions, then the senate might consider a conscious recruitment drive to bring some new faces into the picture.

TRAIN YOUR REPLACEMENTS

Once a senate or other faculty body has identified possible future leaders, those potential leaders should be trained and prepared for the position in question. Such training can be accomplished in various ways. Many local senates have created a president-elect position in order to provide for a smoother transition, allowing the future leader to shadow the activities of the sitting president. A similar system could be created for department heads, committee chairs, and other positions.

Institutes and other activities sponsored by the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges are also important for giving future leaders a broader view of statewide issues and a more developed understanding of faculty rights and responsibilities. These events include not just the Faculty Leadership Institute that is held each June, but also the bi-yearly plenary sessions, area meetings, the Curriculum Institute, Vocational Education Leadership Institute, and others. Whenever funds permit, colleges should not limit attendance at these events to the current president or a select few regular participants, but rather should encourage other potential leaders to join in the state level activities in order both to prepare those individuals for possible future roles and to develop a more informed and involved faculty overall.

CONSIDER TEAM LIMITS

Term limits on leadership positions can be beneficial in many ways. Potential new leaders, faculty bodies as a whole, and even the active participants in leadership themselves may find that limitations on service in a specific position can have advantages.

Many of us have seen situations in which an individual has remained in a particular position for an extended period of time. The person becomes identified with the position, and no one is willing to step forward to challenge for the chair. Even when the sitting individual is very effective, such a situation can become unhealthy. New ideas and new approaches can strengthen any organization. Moreover, when the position of chair seems so secure in the hands of one person, others may tend not even to consider stepping forward, and thus when the sitting leader finally steps aside the body is confronted with the absence of a viable replacement.

In other cases, the chair himself or herself may appreciate having a way out of the position. Many leaders have remained in their positions longer than they wished because they are pressured with cries that no one else is ready, that no one else wants to take over, or even that no one else can do the job as well. While such claims are flattering and the boost to our egos often helps convince us to remain in a position we do not really want, the truth is that no one is indispensable or irreplaceable. Every one of our colleges has capable individuals who can step forward into leadership but who may postpone doing so because it is easier to leave things in the hands of the very capable sitting chair or president. Term limits may help chairs avoid being pressured into holding on to a position and force some potentially strong new leaders to become more involved.

LEARNING TO LET GO

Just as some faculty leaders have remained in a position for an extended time, others have, whether consciously or subconsciously, remained attached to their positions even after leaving them. As we nurture and train our replacements, we also need to let go of the ways in which we might approach specific situations. Senate presidents and other leaders need to develop their own styles as we mentor them and after taking office. Mentorship, making suggestions, and being a sounding board are critical and useful ways to help new leaders settle into their positions. However, micro-managing and second-guessing will not produce the desired outcome—strong and independent leaders who have been trained to replace us.

All of these ideas are meant as possibilities for consideration. Each local senate or other body will have to decide for itself and according to its own culture how best to grow its future leaders. The important thing is to remain conscious of the need to identify and train new leaders in whatever ways are determined locally to be appropriate and viable so that we do not find ourselves without strong and prepared replacements when our time comes to step aside.