Support the Success of a New Provost

Robbin D Crabtree
David Alan Sapp

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Collaboration

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By Robbin D. Crabtree, Ph.D.; and David Alan Sapp, Ph.D.

Soon after being appointed dean for the first time, Robbin remembers reading an article for new administrators. The advice that struck her — and proved to be both insightful and helpful — was something like “Beware the first shark to swim up to the boat.”

Indeed, the first folks who approached immediately after her appointment were ones who had rarely spoken to her when she was a faculty member. Now they were obsequious new friends with tales of personal woe that they were sure the new dean would want to redress immediately, typically with more salary, increased resources, or augmented status. Their requests were rarely on behalf of their colleagues or an academic program other than their own. Often these were folks who were not engaged in shared governance, but rather those who perceived themselves as disenfranchised “losers” in some real or

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Of Counsel

Prepare for impact of potential shifts in affirmative-action landscape

By Michael Porter, Esq.

Beginning in early 2017, many higher education administrators experienced anxiety about how the Trump administration would address various issues at colleges and universities. The federal government’s position on affirmative action seemed ripe for a policy shift.

Several key U.S. Supreme Court cases have underscored that institutions can, in some circumstances, consider race or other protected status in admissions decisions to further student diversity, including Grutter v. Bollinger, 539 US 306 (2003); Gratz v. Bollinger, 539 US 244 (2003); and Fisher v. University of Texas, 136 S Ct 2198 (2016) (known as “Fisher II”). Those cases set a high standard for legal consideration of protected status that courts apply rigorously — a program must be narrowly tailored to further institutional diversity.

In basic terms, an institution must show that protected status is only one

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imagined campus fracas. Their unsolicited advice began with “If you want to be successful as dean, you’ll...” and ended with the recounting of promises made by past administrations and a warning of imminent doom if action wasn’t taken to rectify glaring injustices.

This story is shared here not only because it remains good advice for new deans and provosts, but also as a cautionary tale to the would-be sharks out there among the deans, associate and vice provosts, and special assistants like us. While we understand the need to properly welcome, orient, brief, and prepare a new provost hired externally or internally to lead our institutions, and that we often feel a responsibility to advise a newcomer about the peculiarities of institutional history and culture, we must be mindful not to be (nor be perceived as) among those self-interested sharks. Instead, we might take it upon ourselves — in addition to our other contributions — to gently warn the new provost about the circling sharks outside her door, ensuring an appropriate heads-up so that a newcomer does not face known predators cold.

An unwavering spirit of generosity is key to resisting temptations to act with even a whiff of self-interest. In that same vein, we provide a few tips for those of us committed to supporting the success of a new provost.

1 Reflect on your intentions. Before sharing unsolicited advice with your new provost, ask yourself why you are so eager to do so. Are you trying to prove to someone (or yourself) that you should be the one in charge or that you should have been selected for the position yourself? If so, it is time to take a giant step backwards. After all, you didn’t apply for the job (or, at least, you didn’t get it), so beware of acting like you have all the answers or could do the job better. That said, you know the context and the stakeholders; you know where the potholes are and likely have much of value to share. In the ethnographic sense, you are among the key informants for the new provost. So, before you speak, make certain that your intentions are appropriate. Approach briefings with both honesty and humility. Remember that the new leader has studied your institution and learned much during the search process. You want the newcomer to feel confirmed in her decision to come to your campus and to be excited about the work ahead.

2 Have your own house in order. It is important to establish your own credibility through briefings about your areas of responsibility, including providing an organizational chart of your operation as context. Resist the temptation to begin your new relationship with the provost in advocacy mode. Rather, highlight key strengths, successes, and achievements in ways that demonstrate your priorities and the trajectory of your work on behalf of your unit, the broader institution, and the students and faculty whom you serve. There will inevitably be emergencies for the new provost in the early weeks and months of her tenure. Do your absolute best to ensure that those emergencies are not in your areas of responsibility, especially in ways that illustrate carelessness, lack of focus, or incompetency on your part. Having your house in order will give the provost one less thing to worry about as she learns more about the many challenges facing the institution that will require her immediate attention and leadership.

3 Never show up the boss. It takes time to get one’s sea legs on a new ship, and the provost may stumble around, especially in the early days. Be generous in your response to these missteps, and don’t criticize the new provost publicly or privately. While others may show impatience, don’t follow their lead. Don’t roll your eyes in public meetings.
undercut her with gossip, or correct the new provost in ways that cause her to lose face, even privately. Respect the position, and discover ways to respect the person. Be worthy of the provost’s trust, and remember that the institution’s success rests with the new provost’s success, that the provost comes with her own goals and priorities, and that these may diverge from your own. Take the opportunity to remind others (and yourself) that she deserves time. Celebrate her accomplishments and the accomplishments of the institution in ways that don’t bring attention to yourself.

4 Present multiple options, not definitive solutions. While you can provide information, insights on people, and options in terms of actions, it’s important for the provost to come to her own judgments and decisions. She may have different priorities, perspectives, and insights than you have. Her style may be different, and her decisions also may be different. Keep this in mind in helping her to understand the nature and complexities of the problem, the human and material resources at the institution that could be leveraged, and the pros and cons of various approaches based on your insights. Try to speak faithfully to the positions of stakeholders and constituencies other than your own, being honest about your own opinions but not wedded to your ideas. There is rarely only one solution to a problem. Moreover, the politics of any situation on your campus are different for your new provost than they are for you. The provost operates within a different matrix of constraints than does the dean or another of her direct reports, and you must realize that often those constraints determine the provost’s options and decisions.

5 Know when to mind your own business. Always remember that the provost is your supervisor and one of the senior leaders at your institution. In an effort to communicate effectively with your supervisor, ask yourself: How can you keep your role as subordinate in balance with your value as advisor, translator, and potential confidante? Even when you have the best of intentions and the most supportive of impulses, it can sometimes be best to resist the temptation to comment and advise. Allow the new provost to learn on her own and to ask questions when she wants. When in doubt, stay focused on your own work. Even in cases when the provost asks your opinion, weigh your response mindfully. Similarly, when put in the position of explaining the provost’s mindset and actions (e.g., to faculty), know when you should do so and when it can be better to let the provost speak for herself, rather than putting yourself in the translator or mediator role.

While much of the guidance here may seem self-evident and perhaps obvious, these tips are more easily understood than performed at times. After all, the stall in momentum followed by the acceleration of change and surge in new initiatives that typically follow leadership transitions can be frustrating even if a new leader does not plot a full-scale sea change. The structures of our institutions that, at the same time, pit us as both collaborators and competitors also heighten tensions during times of uncertainty and change. We must confess that we, too, have failed to manifest our own best advice from time to time, and though a few hand slaps have ensued, mostly we have been beneficiaries of gracious and patient new leaders who have valued our work on behalf of our institutions.

The ideal outcome of any change in leadership is continued and enhanced institutional success. Supporting the new provost’s transition is in service to that outcome. Deans, associate and vice provosts, and others will do much behind the scenes to ensure the success of any transition, whether through active intervention or by staying out of the way. Either way, it’s not about who gets credit for the new leader’s success. In the long run, what will be remembered is the success or failure of the collective.

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