

A New Dean Meets a New Day in Theological Education

James Hudnut-Beumler
Columbia Theological Seminary

The Balancing Act of the Contemporary Dean

I came to the job at the relatively young age of thirty-five. As such, I suffered slightly under the stigma that attaches to youth. (I'm not complaining. There is probably a stigma that goes with every condition and position in life. Still there were days I would rather not have been referred to as "Dean Doogie.") Deans are supposed to be wise, experienced, knowledgeable, and established in their fields. On an earlier model, the dean was naturally the most senior, nonsenile member of the regular faculty. But that was in the days when the curriculum was set years in the past, was well understood by the faculty, and the dean's role was to keep a well-oiled machine running until the next caretaker took his [sic] place. The fact that we hold on to such cherished myths as the kindly old dean is, I think, both a symbol of our best hopes for a slower-paced way of academic life and a refusal to acknowledge the changes that have overtaken theological education in recent years.

Three of the changes of the last quarter-century seem, to me, significant enough to require comment: faculty longevity, increasing program complexity, and a growing division of academic labor. Faculty in theological education, though institutionally loyal by the standards of other occupations, are less likely now than formerly to have served the same institution their entire careers. These faculty members are also less likely to have attended the school at which they are currently teaching. Thus, institutional memory and practices are less likely to reside in the persons of the faculty. Given the changed context, a dean's job is a balancing act of recovering the tradition, enabling new faculty to embrace it, but also enabling faculty members old and new to create new traditions and practices that correspond to their collective vision of what God requires of theological education at that moment. No job today would be more deadly than that of a dean whose only role was to socialize new faculty members to the way things have been done for eighty-five years.

Faculty not only change, so do programs. In the last thirty years, most theological institutions changed their curriculums not once, but several times. Schools have also added programs in lay education, extension education, global

and contextual education, and Doctor of Ministry programs, all of which make the typical school a more complex and lively institution than its 1950s antecedent. Often, however, it is the dean who, in the name of the faculty, is charged with holding the creative mess together in some kind of order and with some standards of educational integrity. Bringing creative order out of latent chaos is a good job for someone who likes that kind of work. Still, it is not the kind of work I, or my faculty colleagues, was trained for in graduate school. It is not surprising, therefore, that the most senior faculty member may not have either the gifts or the inclination to take on the role of dean today. Instead, our institutions have increasingly sought persons with administrative gifts to be their chief academic officers and to run their burgeoning special-purpose programs. At one level, this is good, for in the case of many schools it has opened the way for pastors and church leaders to play an active role in the life of a seminary. Our school's administrative ranks are filled with people with successful pastoral experience, and these people often do a better job modeling worship and group-process skills for ministry than those of us with academic doctorates.

This shift in who becomes a dean has, however, opened up the specter of a two-tiered faculty composed of "administrators" on the one hand and "real educators" on the other. Given such a bifurcated view of the seminary, the question arises for the dean, "Which are you?" Ultimately, this platform of "administrators versus teachers" is an unhealthy premise upon which to build educational institutions, but unhealthier still for seminaries that seek to instill in students the love of scholarship joined to practice in the service of God.

What do we mean by the word "administration"? For some administrators, it means "getting others to do what I want." For some faculty, it is "carrying out our directives, doing what is beneath faculty talent." It is both these views that stand in the way of administration being understood as a vocation on a par with scholarship and teaching. Either of these depictions of administration negates someone in the academic setting.

It is important to note that the cleavages in contemporary theological education are more complex than the simple "administrators versus teachers" dichotomy. I am surprised, for instance, by how much disdain some church leaders have for the academy. Some of our trustees and administrators talk very easily about what a mistake faculty tenure is. Others love the books produced for popular church-related presses but cannot understand why some of our other professors spend years working on manuscripts that only other scholars within the field will read. The idea that each of those popular works is built on a scholarly consensus forged in the latter kind of painstaking work is surprising news, maybe even suspicious news to this portion of the seminary's constituency. I find myself as dean often engaged in a process I liken to translation. I

explain the world view of the professors to the church constituency and interpret what the church is saying to the faculty. Let me hasten to add that the faculty, in my experience, has much greater comprehension of what goes on in the church than either the average clergy person or seminary critic thinks. Faculty members are often in a different church every other week and have a set of intimate informants in the form of valued former students that most bishops would gladly receive. On the other hand, because they are so smart, they do not suffer fools easily and have a tendency to put forward stunning conclusions in public settings whose acceptance is dependent upon a level of thought that the average layperson has never engaged and the average cleric is unwilling to entertain. The truth will set us free, it is said, after it makes us miserable.

Where Do Deans Come From?

Given the balancing act of translation and mediation I have ascribed to the contemporary chief academic officer, it behooves us to ask, "Where then do deans come from?" Are good deans born, or made? From my own experience, I would suggest that nurture plays a far more important role than we might expect. Clearly the best deans bring to their work a devotion to people as well as a deep understanding of scholarship and scholars. But these qualities are not sufficient in most cases to help a person negotiate the shoals of academic leadership in most seminaries I know. If that were the case, most faculty members could step into the role of dean easily. Unfortunately, the laws of unintended consequences operate at full tilt in most of our institutions and even the best faculty promoted to dean quickly find that one must think ahead several steps further than one is used to doing in order to preserve community while enhancing educational norms of institutional practices. Most faculty are adept at reading students' reactions in a classroom setting. It is far more difficult to discern the outcome of a memo, but both activities involve action and interpretation. So the skills of academic leadership are related but not identical to those of teaching.

How then is one to attain the skills of academic leadership prior to assuming a position as critical as academic dean? I think the short answer is by using the skills in a less critical context first. This is somewhat akin to asking teenagers to practice driving in a parking lot prior to heading off for the interstate. I had a running start on this job of chief academic officer. I suppose you might call it being a petty academic officer. In fact, I was director of an honors academic program in the area of public policy for undergraduates at an elite university. It was good training for this job, for I was able to see the state of the art of teaching, program support, evaluation, and advising going on around me. Some of the

A New Dean Meets a New Day

successful practices I have brought to the seminary were learned from others in that university setting. I was also able to work with quality people among the faculty and students, which in retrospect was like a physician being allowed to practice on less complex patients before moving on to multiple diagnosis cases. Theological students bring tremendous complexity to the educational setting, and it was good to begin my “practice” with nineteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, of above average intellect, whose vocational objectives were largely irrelevant to the education in which we engaged. In a typical university or college one has more support to fall back on in the areas of psychological support, student discipline, and counseling than we have at the seminary level. I also was able to work in a less visible, less politically charged environment than the deanship and to have time to care about people and learn what’s worth taking time on and what can be avoided. My ability still to care for faculty and students in the face of hundreds of details, I owe to the time I spent at the university. There is one other thing I derived from those years and that was compassion for faculty born of a reduced intimidation. I found myself at work in relation to world-class faculty—people who had run the Federal Reserve, the National Security Council, and the Treasury Department—who were, nevertheless, insecure in the face of a freshly minted Ph.D. asking them to do something they had not yet done in teaching undergraduates.

Not all theological school deans can or should have prior outside administrative experience. There are some things only a theological educator will see. Therefore, if we are to have good deans at our schools, we should nurture the leadership of particular faculty members who have taken on limited administrative responsibilities. Area and department chairs, chairs of committees, and directors of programs with the help of a supportive dean and questioning colleagues can grow into the sort of persons we would want as our deans. The dean must be, among other things, excited about being a second-order educator. That is, if faculty members are principally hands-on educators, deans educate primarily through providing the structures and contexts through which that first-order education takes place. Catalogs, rules and degree requirements, budgets and curricula are all educational vehicles if properly understood. The subsidiary administrative tasks that involve faculty are a place where this understanding can be developed and through it a cohort of academic leaders.

I think I had a head start in this job in another way as well, and I owe that to my years growing up watching my father, and later my wife, as pastors. Remembering what real churches are all about is invaluable to any theological educator. But perhaps even more valuable to me were the countless lessons in working with volunteers in a Christian setting. Much of the dean’s role is parallel to the pastor’s. The quality of what gets done in each institution depends not on

fiat, or moralization, but on getting people to do what they want to do and have them want to do what they should. Where do deans come from? Above all, from a state of mind, engendered by a vocational commitment to the good that can be done through their institutions with their leadership.

Advice for Those Who Would Be Deans

I am alarmed by how easily the deanship has eaten up some of my colleagues at other institutions. They have largely been undone by the inability to do the research they discovered was their spiritual nourishment. Or, they could not stand the pressure of being unjustly judged by their former friends and colleagues. Or, they couldn't tolerate the meetings. Each of these issues lies in wait for those who would be a chief academic officer. Nevertheless, I have noticed that there are some people I respect who have been happy deans for quite some time. Here is what I learned from them that seems to work. Bill McKinney, when he was dean of Hartford Seminary, called me before I even moved to Georgia. He told me to block out time for my own research. I'm glad I have. I'd recommend it to others for two reasons. First, you will not be happy if you always feel you gave up something to be dean. Second, you need to have time to engage in the practices of scholarship in order to effectively work with other scholars. It is too easy to fall back upon the thoughts one liked in graduate school, but unless one wishes to be like that preacher still using hoary old illustrations of something Col. House said to Charles Lindberg, one needs to read, to think, form opinions, and to test out ideas on peers.

"Love them that revile you." Deans from way back have had to learn this the hard way, just like disciples did. And just like Jesus said. More people will probably distrust deans because of the role they occupy than will dislike them for genuine reasons. Living well is the best revenge. In this case that means treating all decently and with respect, even when under attack.

Meetings can be our undoing, sapping our strength, dulling our creativity, and crowding out all else. But meetings at their best can be thought of as preventive medicine. Deans ought to be judged not only for the good they do but also upon the evil they prevent. Unfortunately, the dean's best work in this area is often hidden. Just as it is impossible to be a good dean without a good faculty of persons who would at least like to work with one another, it is impossible to be a good dean without solid working relationships with other senior administrators. A surprising amount of my time as dean is taken up with consideration of one policy, practice, or another in concert with other administrators. We spend hours trying to figure out how to close the seminary in case of snow, how to revise vacation policies for staff members in such a way as to be just for both

A New Dean Meets a New Day

old and new employees, and how to protect library resources from the occasional dishonest user. Our product comes in the form of the hurt feelings avoided as much as in the other positive goods which are often elusive to achieve. It also comes in the form of good work done together that never could be done alone.

Some Thoughts on Academic Leadership in Theological Education

Academic leadership in theological education is still an amateur's game compared to other sectors of higher education. I represent a school in the top quartile of ATS schools in terms of faculty, budget, and number of students. But when state and regional agencies ask, "Where is your planning officer?" or "Who is your chief evaluation specialist?" I recognize how small we are. Again, we have a large faculty by ATS standards, but a very small one by comparison to other schools in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Yet we are all affected by what Harold Hodgkinson called "emergence of the single standard" for institutions of higher education and the institutional complexity of running a school in an era where we care simultaneously about diversity, sexual harassment, nonviolent pedagogy, academic freedom and doctrinal purity. Often the point person for interfacing competing worlds and values is the dean. At the same time, the scale of our institutions *vis a vis* others requires a huge investment from theological school faculty. For instance, a school of fifteen faculty members and a university with 600 teachers probably have about the same number of persons involved in a tenure-review process. Duplicate that for every function of the freestanding school and one quickly becomes thankful that at least we in the theological realm do not have to oversee intercollegiate athletic programs.

I believe there is no work that is more important than helping people make sense of God in their lives. That is why I'm happy working to help form the "hands that would shape our souls." Still, I'm aware that not everyone agrees with me, and that the cultural position of today's theological enterprise is complicated in at least two ways. We must on the one hand work with some of the least equipped persons the church has ever had from which to make its ministry. The great influx of second-career students has brought our ministry great diversity in experience. Those of us trained in the humanities have also learned from these new students that there are many professions where a person can be successful without being able to communicate effectively in writing. The ministry, however, continues to be a word- and people-centered enterprise. Our new task is to achieve both theological literacy and what were formerly basic

communications skills. On the other hand, we face our educational challenge with resources produced by voluntary organizations—churches and denominations—that are themselves under great financial and social pressure to take care of things at home.

The personnel aspect of the dean's work is perhaps the single most important portion of his or her work. Too often I receive two kinds of applications from prospective faculty. The first is from the religious studies person who never tells our search committee why he (usually) or she (rarer) wants to teach at a seminary, much less ours. The second is from a minister who seems to believe that teaching would be a "piece of cake" compared to the parish. I am always on the lookout for those persons who love the church and Jesus Christ, but whose best service can be rendered in the vocation of teaching and who know it.

Once a search committee has selected a candidate for a position, the care and nurture of the new colleague falls heavily on the dean. The opportunities for this nurture range from the trivial (how to get photocopying done) to the dramatic (how to offer a course in an area very close to an established faculty member's "turf"). The teaching and the research that are at the core of a faculty member's calling will be choked off in an environment that is not conducive to academic flourishing. Setting the environment for faculty success is the dean's job.

I became dean in this time and place by accident of generational mishap. That is not entirely true, of course, but perhaps my story is instructive for the crossroads we have reached in American higher education and theological education more specifically. There are not enough forty-something scholars who want to do administration. A generation of persons whose experiences with the establishment taught it to distrust systems and eschew authority is now rising to the ranks of seniority in theological education. It appears it will soon fall to a younger cohort of church and academic leaders to run the seminaries. This will be a time pregnant with possibilities for damage done by inexperience, but also a time for fresh reconstructions of theological education by persons not habituated to particular ways of doing things. Which pattern will emerge from the possibilities hinges, I believe, on how we choose, train, and value our chief academic officers in theological education.

I would like to think I would still wish to be dean even if I were at the top of the professional rewards ladder when asked. More importantly for theological education, I would like to see other colleagues who conceived of the deanship as a means to fulfill their vocations as educators. Teaching is, after all, a privilege and so too is academic leadership. We all know that we shape minds in the classroom. What we need to remember is that with academic leadership we form the environment for that transformative educational moment. Whether good education happens or not is the product of what the teacher does and a panoply

A New Dean Meets a New Day

of other factors with which the dean is often much more closely involved than the professor.

A Final Word

A day in the life of the dean is often busy, but rarely boring. With the right spirit, there is joy, even fun, to be experienced. The solitary person need not apply, for human interaction is in the nature of the role. And though the dean must sometimes make a decision all alone, the role is not lonely. The opportunity to share ideas, to be part of plans, to extend the good that is done through one's institution are rewards enough for those who would undertake the so-called "burden" of leadership.

James Hudnut-Beumler is dean of the faculty and executive vice president of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, where he is also associate professor of religion and culture. He has served on the staff of the Religion Division of Lilly Endowment where his portfolio included programs in urban ministry, the financing of American religion, and religion and philanthropy. He previously was director of Princeton University's undergraduate program of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.