

What I Wish I had Known About Being an Associate Dean

Wednesday Webinar, 10/28/2020

Thanks to everyone who participated and shared their experiences. As associate deans we are important to our schools, our colleagues, and our students. Because it is probably not said enough, THANKS FOR YOUR HARD WORK and for all that you do, especially in this crazy year of 2020! What follows is the advice and insights of the group.

- 1) Try to stay on top of phone calls and emails; they keep coming and they often require a response.
- 2) Try to maintain some boundaries so that you are not working 24/7. Consider limiting when you respond to emails and how available you are on weekends. The job can consume you if you let it.
- 3) No matter how long you have been at a school and no matter how involved you have been, there are lots of things to learn behind the scenes regarding how the law school runs and what staff do to keep things running. Learn from staff and maintain good relationships with staff.
- 4) May be surprised to learn that once you become an associate dean, some faculty colleagues may express distrust and suspicion of the “central administration.” Not all faculty “friends” will remain your friend while you are an associate dean. Their issues may not be personal to you.
- 5) You may get little feedback if you are doing well at the job. On the flipside, you will probably hear if the feedback about your work is not positive.
- 6) You may enter the job with the idea that you will create and push initiatives. You may find it hard to have time for initiatives because of the volume of regular tasks.
- 7) You will often have to choose between being popular and being effective. It is important to be fair and balanced.
- 8) You will need to negotiate the scope of your duties with your dean—how much autonomy you have versus the need to run things by your dean before you do them. Every dean will be a bit different.
- 9) You may feel like you need a degree in psychology to navigate among the different constituencies with whom you work—faculty, other deans, University officials, students, admissions, career services, staff, student organizations, alums, and more.
- 10) When you are an associate dean people bring problems to you to solve. You may be surprised by the constant stream of problems that arise. The job requires listening, fixing, and solving. However, you won't be able to fix everything. Also, enough problems will be presented to you; no need to find problems to fix.
- 11) The job is different and changing all the time. You will need to figure it out. You may have days when your planned tasks are not accomplished because they were replaced with other tasks that arose during the day. That is okay. The job includes handling things that arise. Learn to feel a sense of accomplishment in handling the things that come up.
- 12) You will need your skills as a lawyer to broker deals, to negotiate, to research and write, to advocate, to speak on behalf of others. You need to have good judgment.
- 13) Consider scheduling time on your calendar for tasks you must accomplish such as teaching and scholarship. Otherwise, your time will be taken from you. Create and enforce boundaries. Prioritize tasks.
- 14) People will compare you to other deans and associate deans. That comes with the job.

- 15) You do not need to be available to drop everything for everyone every time they ask. Some true emergencies will require you immediately; some “emergencies” are created by someone else’s procrastination and they may not deserve your immediate attention.
- 16) Recognize that there are at least two sides to every story, especially when a student or faculty member is complaining about someone else. Avoid taking sides, and avoid making snap judgments on less than all the information. Encourage people to discuss issues directly with each other before you get involved. Sometimes you may need to serve as a mediator.
- 17) Create or take advantage of having a month-by-month list of tasks that you need to handle. Calendar important recurring deadlines such as ABA reporting deadlines.
- 18) Consult your predecessor and consult staff regularly for guidance and advice.
- 19) Some associate deans teach a course each semester; some do not teach.
- 20) Use or build a bank of letters or emails that the associate dean usually sends out, such as letters regarding registration, the schedule, exams, etc. No need to reinvent the wheel.
- 21) Try to schedule time to reflect. You do not need to answer every question brought to you on the spot. Especially when you are new to the job, get in the habit of listening to requests and telling the requestors that you will get back to them. This time will give you an opportunity to think, to research the answer, and to potentially seek advice from a predecessor or trusted colleague.
- 22) Be wary of the people who drop projects on your door step. Some people are big idea people who bring you ideas that they expect you to research and implement.
- 23) Consider leveraging technology to increase productivity. Some computer programs and apps can be used to help you organize and become more efficient. Microsoft teams can assist with communication among a team; Onenote can be good for keeping track of tasks to do. Omni programs? can be useful with a Mac.
- 24) Hold regularly scheduled meetings, long or short, for the administrative team to touch base with each other. Carve out time for people to feel connected.
- 25) You will need to be prepared to learn about new things, such as student and faculty accommodations and HR issues. You will need to use management and organizational skills. Every law school and every associate dean position is a bit different depending on the school, the dean, and the other players with whom you work.