

By Michael Palladino

Stepping up to leadership

Four years after I received tenure, the dean of science at my primarily undergraduate institution called to tell me he planned to retire. “I’m recommending you as my replacement,” he said. I didn’t think much of it until a few months later, when the provost and president asked to speak with me. They said they thought I was a strong candidate for dean and asked whether I was interested. I was flattered. But I wondered, “Why me? Why now?” I was a relatively young faculty member, and I would have to oversee academics in disciplines well outside my own. I wasn’t sure I was qualified—or whether I wanted such a drastic change in my professional life.

I loved my job. I could not wait to come to campus every day. I enjoyed the classes I was teaching. And I was midway through a federal research grant, with a lab full of talented and enthusiastic undergraduate research students. We were publishing in good journals and presenting at conferences.

But I took the inquiry seriously and spoke with colleagues to get their perspective. They convinced me that perhaps others saw something in me that I did not see in myself. I had served in leadership positions within a few national organizations, such as the Council on Undergraduate Research, and they thought that my leadership skills would be valuable within our own institution. My colleagues also encouraged me to think about the opportunity I’d have to advance issues that were important to me and other scientists.

In the end, I decided I couldn’t pass it up. I became a scientist because I wanted to have an impact, to make a difference. If I stayed in my current position, I might earn a few more grants, publish more papers, and teach a larger number of students. But the dean position would give me a chance to have a wider impact.

Teaching and research were still important to me, so I negotiated an arrangement that would allow me to continue teaching at least one course each year and maintain a scaled-back research agenda. To make this possible, the university hired a full-time associate dean, who lessened some of my administrative workload.

When I started, I made it a priority to learn how individual departments worked and what they saw as their top needs. I didn’t go in thinking I had all of the answers. Instead, I surrounded myself with smart people, and I listened to what they had to say. That approach was especially helpful when dealing with academic departments I was less familiar with.



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Gradually, I started to see how the university operated beyond my home department—biology—and to see where it could grow. I worked to hire more faculty members and fund a \$48 million project to expand and renovate the science building. I also secured external funding for a summer research program that gave undergraduate students a taste of what it’s like to work in a lab. The work felt rewarding because I enjoyed supporting faculty and watching our students learn and grow.

The transition hasn’t always been easy, however. Juggling the increased demands on my time has been especially challenging. I feel as though I’m constantly switching between different hats—my teaching hat, my research hat, my admin-

istrator hat—and it can be dizzying. I’ve had to make some difficult—and not universally popular—decisions, including to merge the computer science and software engineering departments. And I’ve noticed a shift in my relationships with colleagues: Some have kept me at a greater distance than before, whereas others have sought me out because they want to ask me for something.

Overall, though, my career transition has been positive—so much so that I moved into a vice provost position 7 years after accepting the deanship. I’d strongly encourage other academics to be open to unexpected opportunities in administration, even ones that you may not think you’re ready for. With the changing climate of higher education, institutions desperately need thoughtful, strategic leaders with the communication and organizational skills to lead and inspire their fellow academics. ■

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