Commentary

Navigating the Path to Careers in Academic Pharmacy Administration

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this commentary is to discuss the qualifications, responsibilities, and keys to success for pharmacy faculty considering a department (or division) chair (head) or dean (including assistant or associate dean) position. The perspectives are those of a department chair, vice dean, and past dean of colleges of pharmacy with extensive experience in pharmacy administration. The qualifications for these administrative positions vary by institution, particularly with respect to the institution’s focus on research. Because the dean is the chief executive officer of a college of pharmacy, previous administrative experience is almost always a basic requirement for the position. For associate/assistant deans and department chairs, previous experience as a faculty member is a typical minimum requirement and may include experience as a department vice chair or director of a unit within the department or division. The dean has a fiduciary duty to university administration, as well as to other external and internal stakeholders, to educate and graduate competent pharmacists and to operate within budget. Associate/assistant deans often have responsibility for specific functions of the college, such as student or professional affairs, and it is common for deans to delegate authority, responsibility, and accountability to associate/assistant deans. Department chairs have a unique perspective with respect to college activities because they must not only think about the “big picture” when considering issues with other college administrators but must oversee the implementation and monitoring of strategic initiatives through the faculty and staff who report to them.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of accredited colleges or schools of pharmacy has increased from 102 to 138 as of August 2022.\textsuperscript{1,2} This rapid expansion in the number of pharmacy schools, in conjunction with the “graying” of administrative faculty and faculty burnout, has led to a leadership void within the academy.\textsuperscript{3,4} In many cases, the necessity of filling open administrator positions has led to the hiring of individuals who have little experience working in either academia or the private sector, let alone leadership experience.

Leadership is the subject of many publications, and the topics range from definitions to leadership development. However, there is a paucity of information available to faculty who may aspire for these positions within the pharmacy academy.\textsuperscript{5,6} Fortunately, programs such as the Academic Leadership Fellows Program support and contribute to the development of academic pharmacy leaders\textsuperscript{8}. In addition, individual institutions may provide locally sponsored faculty leadership development programs. The purpose of this commentary is to discuss the qualifications, responsibilities, and keys to success for pharmacy faculty considering a department (or division) chair or dean (including assistant or associate dean) position, particularly in colleges or schools at universities rated by Carnegie as having “very high research activity”\textsuperscript{9} that require faculty to perform research and scholarship. The perspectives are those of a department chair, vice dean, and past dean of colleges of pharmacy who collectively have more than 50 years of experience in pharmacy administration. Some of the generalizations in this paper, such as the responsibilities listed in Table 1, may not apply to all colleges or schools of pharmacy, particularly less research-intensive institutions. However, the important considerations and keys to success for individuals with potential interest in academic pharmacy administration listed in Table 2 have universal applicability.

Some considerations are common to all academic administrators, such as fostering a culture of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion and recognizing that a successful relationship with faculty and

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The qualifications of a dean, associate/assistant dean, or department chair vary not only by university and college but by the specific responsibilities of particular associate/assistant dean and department chair positions. In the case of the dean, one of the more important considerations is the university’s priorities. At a research-intensive university, the incoming dean typically will have substantial research experience, including a track record of obtaining funding and publishing in high-quality peer-reviewed journals. In less research-intensive institutions, particularly those focused on PharmD education, there is likely to be less emphasis on an established research record and more emphasis on previous academic experience or prior leadership experience. Other preferred or required qualifications for a dean’s position include previous executive and fundraising experience, excellent communications skills, and the ability to foster collaborative relationships. Whether the dean should be a pharmacist is somewhat controversial, which may depend on the perspective of the specific institution, but a commitment to understanding pharmacy education and advancing the profession is mandatory.

For associate/assistant dean positions, several years of previous experience as a faculty member is preferred, if not required, because the responsibilities of these positions often involve the curriculum and assessment activities as well as student engagement. The specific assignments and titles depend on the college, but common examples include associate/assistant dean positions for student, academic, or professional affairs. Other associate/assistant dean positions address areas such as graduate education, research, clinical affairs, or business affairs.

In general, department chair positions often vary depending on the priorities of a particular department as well as the college. A pharmacy practice department chair is typically expected to have several years of practice and faculty experience with the amount and type (ie, fundamental vs applied) of research dependent on specific institutional considerations. Alternatively, the chair of a pharmaceutical sciences department would usually be expected to have a successful research career, preferably with additional faculty experience. In addition to the personal characteristics mentioned earlier, all dean, associate/assistant dean, and chair positions require a commitment to advancing diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion.

2. Dean

The dean is the chief executive officer of a college of pharmacy. In many respects, a pharmacy school operates like a small business unit
within a corporation. Although many faculty may not like to think of a college as a business, the dean must consider it one. The dean has a fiduciary duty to university administration to educate and graduate competent pharmacists and to operate within budget. This is the dean’s absolute minimum competency. In addition, at a research-intensive university, the dean will be expected to advance successful research and graduate programs.

Perhaps the most important thing that a dean does is recruit and develop outstanding faculty and staff. Without this, nothing else matters. Creating and supporting opportunities for leadership training for both the faculty and staff demonstrate a commitment to ensure the readiness of potential future leaders. Faculty and staff want to work in a culture that sustains them and allows them to pursue their career goals, so developing and maintaining a positive culture of excellence is essential. It is said that culture trumps strategy 90% of the time. Pharmacy school applicants wish to go to a school with outstanding faculty and where current student pharmacists are pleased with the education they are receiving. Similarly, faculty desire to teach excellent students.

It is critical for the dean to develop and maintain the infrastructure to support the teaching and scholarly needs of faculty and the learning needs of student pharmacists. Within a college of pharmacy at a university with very high research activity, it is equally important for the dean to develop and maintain an infrastructure that allows research and graduate programs to grow and thrive. Biomedical research is complex and increasingly interdisciplinary, so the successful dean must be able to effectively collaborate with other deans and department chairs in other colleges that share a similar vision.

One of the responsibilities of deans is overseeing the college budget, although all pharmacy administrators may have some degree of budgetary management. At some pharmacy schools, departments receive a budget, and they decide on the faculty and staff who will be hired. At other pharmacy schools, faculty and staff lines reside with the dean, and the dean decides how these are allocated among departments. Similarly, provosts may provide deans with a budget, and the dean decides how it will be allocated, while at other institutions, the dean is assigned a specific number of faculty lines. Deans must be flexible and prepared for change because new or revised budget models are often implemented with transitions of provosts and presidents.

Upward management is a critically important role for the dean. Most provosts know little about pharmacy or pharmacy education. The dean must communicate a clear and concise vision to the provost regarding the importance of the pharmacy school in the university’s mission and must effectively advocate for the resources necessary to allow the school to be successful, if not outstanding.

Effective change management is an essential role of an effective dean. Pharmacy schools operate under a shared governance model where faculty primarily determine the curriculum and the courses that they teach. It is critical that the dean work effectively with the curriculum committee and other faculty to ensure congruence with Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education standards and an evolving profession. Similarly, the dean must collaborate with faculty and the provost to ensure that necessary resources for curriculum advancement are available.

Maintaining positive external relations is important for a successful dean. This not only includes interactions with alumni, it includes relationships with healthcare organizations that are important for experiential education, residency training, and translational research. This advocacy often includes developing and maintaining positive relationships with a developing and thriving biotechnology industry. Not only are external relationships important for enhancing education and developing faculty research collaborations, but they are essential for philanthropy. Although deans have primary responsibility and oversight of philanthropy efforts, a culture needs to be created in which all faculty and staff understand and participate in such efforts. Philanthropy is increasingly the ingredient that differentiates a good pharmacy school from an outstanding one. Philanthropy provides endowments that attract faculty, support students, and grow programs. This must be a priority for the 21st-century dean.

The roles and responsibilities of a successful pharmacy school dean are increasingly complex. The successful pharmacy school dean must be surrounded by an outstanding leadership team, and this makes the roles of department chairs and associate/assistant deans paramount.

3. Associate/Assistant Deans

Deans delegate authority, responsibility, and accountability to associate/assistant deans who are responsible for the success of a specific portfolio of responsibilities within the college of pharmacy. Associate/assistant deans take direction from the dean but need to be allowed some autonomy in executing the day-to-day operations of their respective areas. Deans often create associate and assistant dean positions to offload their work and provide a leader who can focus on the uniqueness of areas such as finance, research, PharmD education, graduate education, and student affairs. The growing demands required of deans make it impossible for one person to provide governance in every aspect of the school. Serving as an associate/assistant dean provides leadership and management experience for individuals potentially interested in being a dean.

These leadership positions require similar skills as the dean as they provide vision, lead faculty and staff, model leadership behavior, and solve complicated issues. It is important to demonstrate to the school that the dean has a trusted group of leaders who work as a team to represent the needs of faculty, staff, and students. These roles allow for a focused oversight of the mission of a unit and not only serve to keep the dean abreast of emerging issues and to help develop vision and mission but serve as confidential advisers and strategists that the dean can rely upon as needed to address issues affecting the school at the local, campus, state, and national levels.

Serving in these roles provides many opportunities for individuals to gain leadership skills that would otherwise be difficult to obtain in a structure of 1 dean and 3–4 department chairs. It allows faculty and staff to understand how the school operates in an integrated fashion. Additionally, such faculty and staff may gain more expertise in areas where the dean does not have the time or the bandwidth. Succession planning is a difficult issue to address in some academic cultures, and this model can help the dean groom a potential successor.

Each school has its own practices in how assistant and associate dean titles are used. Depending on the entity to be governed, associate and assistant deans report directly to the dean. Access to the dean can be challenging, and associate and assistant deans provide a channel of communication. In addition to governing specific programs or services in the school, associate and assistant deans serve as the representative of the dean’s office on various committees and task forces at the college and university levels, and in professional or scientific organizations.

4. Department Chair (Head)

In many ways, the activities of department or division chairs model those of the dean with responsibilities such as hiring, budgeting, faculty development, and external relations. This can be excellent preparation for chairs who desire to be future deans. Department chairs have a unique perspective with respect to college activities, because they must not only think about the “big picture” when considering issues with other college administrators but must ensure appropriate implementation and monitoring of strategic initiatives at the departmental level. For example, any substantial change in the curriculum typically involves alterations of teaching assignments and possibly faculty workload. The department chair responsible for a specific group of faculty members must have the discussions necessary to ensure that appropriate curricular changes are adopted and successfully implemented. Similarly, the chair must advocate and negotiate with the dean for any
additional resources that may be necessary to implement proposed changes. Department chairs often serve as part of a college’s senior leadership team that advises the dean on strategic issues related to a college’s vision, mission, goals, and general operations. Additionally, chairs are responsible for all activities involving their departments, including recruiting, hiring, and oversight of faculty and staff. Department chairs may serve on a rotating or longer-term basis depending on the institution, although the minimum qualifications and responsibilities are likely to be similar.

The chair is responsible for managing, empowering, and leading faculty and staff from recruitment to hiring, with subsequent assignment of responsibilities and assessment of all academic-related activities. The chair must be a proficient liaison and advocate for the department across campus, in the community, and to the broader profession when engaging in external or outreach activities such as professional or scientific meetings. Chairs who have practice faculty in their departments or who oversee the administration of the students’ experiential education must be particularly adept at community outreach to maintain strong working relationships with practice sites vital to the mission of the department and college. Similarly, chairs of research-focused departments with graduate programs must ensure that there is an appropriate research infrastructure and that graduate students’ needs are addressed. The chair is responsible for appropriate and efficient management of department-related funding and ensuring achievement of any financial and non-financial measures of productivity assessed at the departmental level. The chair also has responsibilities (with other administrators) for safeguarding shared governance and maintaining unit policies, procedures, and other applicable documents, including those related to annual performance reviews, promotion and tenure, and strategic planning. Chairs are responsible for leading by example with respect to their own teaching, scholarly, and service activities, which vary by department or division. Also, depending on the specific institution, the chair may have assigned responsibilities for other activities such as curriculum development, accreditation, or programming.

5. Conclusion

Dean, associate/assistant dean, and department chair positions share similar qualifications and some responsibilities, but each has its own unique roles and responsibilities. In all cases, the individuals seeking administrative positions must decide what they are willing to give up in order to take on their new responsibilities. Burdens, as well as rewards, are associated with academic leadership positions. With respect to burdens, the successful academic administrator must be willing to give of her/himself for the benefit of the organization and the people in it, often giving credit to others for accomplishments. There are personal sacrifices that must be made because, in the end, it is about advancing the organization. However, there are several rewards associated with administrative positions; in particular, the ability to have substantial involvement in college decision-making and the development and implementation of system changes leading to an overall improvement of the organization. In summary, the successful academic leader lives vicariously through the success of faculty, students, and staff.

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