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Eight Challenges You WILL Face During Your Tenure as Dean

Israel Galindo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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One of my favorite cartoons depicts a bowling pin on a psychiatrist's coach. There is a diploma on the wall, a plant in the corner, and a therapist with notepad sitting behind the disconcerted bowling pin character. The caption has the cartoon bowling pin asking, simply, "Why me?"

If you're a leader in the system, it does little good to ask, "Why me?" when troubles and challenges come your way. If you're a leader, you're the 1-pin in the lineup for misplaced anxiety, complaints, and blame. Leaders are the point person for anxiety in any system. It just comes with the job. As second-chair leaders who lead from the center of the organization, challenges are to be expected in the job of the dean. For deans, asking "Why me?" is a meaningless question. The better question related to who must deal with problems and challenges in the school is, "Who else but me? I'm the dean!"

8 Challenges You WILL Face as Dean



It may seem, given the average tenure of theological school deans (4.5 years), most would be able to avoid major crises and challenges. Alas, that is not the case. Here are eight challenges most deans can count on facing during their term in office.

The Eight Challenges You WILL Deal With as Dean

1. Student Issues. At some point in your tenure you will likely need to be "the bad guy" and be the one who makes the call on dismissing a student. Whether for academic failures (plagiarism, cheating, a failing GPA), financial irresponsibility (a failure to pay tuition bills or housing rent, or accumulating debt over an established limit), a demonstrable lack of "fitness for ministry," or other offense or infraction, it is often the dean who is called upon to make the call. The issue of plagiarism alone is epidemic, and not likely to abate. Deans can count on having to deal with an increasing number of plagiarism cases in student academic work. While tragic and uncomfortable, it's worth accepting that, in some cases, dismissing a student is often the best thing to do, not only for the seminary, but for the student.

2. Faculty discontent. If you're doing the job right, you'll not be able to make everyone happy. Especially during times of institutional challenges or reorganization, during which difficult decisions need to be made, every decision will make someone upset--whether the decision affects them directly or not, and regardless that it was the right decision.

3. Presidential challenges. The relationship between a dean and the president is a critical one. It sets the tone, helps or hinders making the vision a reality, and can help or hinder both the effectiveness of the organization and the cultural working environment. Leading from the middle, deans often are caught in triangles with the president on one corner, the dean on the other, and fill-in-the-blank on the third (faculty members, students, trustees, donors, and any number of issues, like interpretations about the vision, ideas about priorities, and

expectations). Additionally, most deans can count on a presidential transition--an entering president, an exiting president, a presidential transitioning process. Some deans may need to deal with a president who defects in place, resulting in a leadership vacuum. Others may find themselves having to coach and educate a new president about the odd world of seminary culture for those who come in from outside the field of theological education (e.g., an accomplished parish minister or a denominational leader).

4. Financial challenges. Whether a school is endowment rich or tuition-challenged, most deans will experience financial challenges of some kind during their tenure. At worst, a dean will be called upon to help navigate the institution during a time of declared financial exigency. Less toxic challenges may include pushing for raises during belt-tightening, making a case for new scholarships, dealing with the distribution of resources in the face of the limitation of means, or making do with creative technological patchwork for instructional technologies that are quickly becoming obsolete and ineffective.

5. Staff changes and conflicts. Most people in an organization tend to work under the illusion of a sense of permanence and stability. From their vantage points, however, deans see the constant nature of change in the organization, including people entering and leaving. Workforce turnover brings with it the constant need for orientation, training, and adaptation to new relationships and work functions in the culture of the school. In addition, deans can count on having to deal with staff and employee conflict of some sort any given year. It is not uncommon for a dean to be involved in the dismissal process of a staff member during her or his tenure. Deans will be wise to anticipate this likelihood and to be proactive in establishing practices and procedures for handling the firing of personnel (hint: maintain detailed documentation!).

6. Curricular challenges. Course schedules and budgets are perpetual moving targets, both of which can contribute to curricular challenges. Whether dealing with curriculum assessment, a dreaded curriculum revision, or creating or closing a degree program, deans can count on facing challenges related to curricula almost daily. Curricula have a short shelf life, four to five years. It's not unusual for a theological school to maintain a curriculum program for 10 years with a little tweaking here and there. Ultimately, those tweaks start to cause the program of study to implode due to the unsystematic band-aid approach to addressing programmatic challenges, student profile changes, and faculty changes. One of the biggest curricular challenges, of course, will be faced by deans whose tenure in office coincides with an accreditation visit.

7. Legal challenges. As unlikely as it may seem, it's not unusual for a dean to face legal issues during his or her tenure. These can range from a nuisance (a subpoena for student records, a call from an office in the DOE, or a consultation with the seminary lawyer on a policy or governance issue) to being named in a lawsuit against the school. It's unlikely this likelihood is even mentioned in the job description you were presented with when interviewing for the job. When legal challenges present themselves as part of the dean's job, your school's attorney becomes your best friend.

8. Personal Challenges. Given a dean can face any or all of the above challenges, it's no surprise that other challenges will be of a more personal nature. Few can appreciate the pressures and work load of the deanship. Deans will likely face personal challenges of all sorts, though not all will be toxic or detrimental to their well-being. There will be personal challenges related to competency and self-doubt, to character and personal integrity, relationships and loneliness, personal goals and stamina, and vocation and meaning, just to mention a few.

If you're a dean, you WILL deal with more than one of these issues during your tenure (and some hapless deans will face them all!), and it will make little sense to ask, "Why me?" No academic institution can afford to have its leaders defect in place merely because a situation is uncomfortable. While this may not be welcomed news, to be forewarned is to be forearmed, as they say. When these challenges come up we may be tempted to cry, "They didn't train me to deal with these things!" The uncomfortable truth is there's little by way of training that prepares one to deal with complex crises. These challenges come with the job. How many have you experienced so far?

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