

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Seasons of a Dean's Life: Understanding the Role and Building Leadership Capacity

by Walt Gmelch, Dee Hopkins, and Sandra Damico
(Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC., 2011, 88 pages)

This well-written and concise book provides an excellent opportunity for university academics and administrators to consider the practical aspects of deanship in the context of higher education leadership theory. It is rare to find a work of this calibre that bridges the gap between the theory of educational leadership and the practical experience of academic “practitioners.” *Seasons of a Dean's Life* supports its hypotheses in leadership theory both through references to models by researchers such as Bolman and Conger and through examples of real decanal experiences drawn from interviews. The three authors have cleverly used the seasons of the year to symbolize the changing cycles within a dean's mandate. In this work, Gmelch, Hopkins, and Damico successfully address important questions related to building leadership capacity in universities and colleges.

Seasons of a Dean's Life is the culmination of a research study based on narrative research practices and features quotes by active deans who share stories about their professional life at various stages of their careers. The anecdotes—anonymous excerpts throughout the work—help validate the authors' theory that successfully filling decanal positions has become increasingly complex and challenging for educational institutions. As researchers, the authors have made the effort to interview a broad sampling of deans to support their views about competencies related to the position. The authors' use of primary material from interviews emphasizes gender representation and diversity among the interviewees.

This short book actually reads like a how-to manual and could appeal to a broader readership than its title would lead us to believe. As a matter of fact, many academics would be well served to reflect on the authors' perceptive interpretation of the various cycles or “seasons” in senior academic leadership. Associate deans and department chairs considering their next career move could certainly benefit from reading *Seasons of a Dean's Life*.

The authors hypothesize that very few academics set out to become the chief academic officers of their faculties when they embark on their academic careers, and therefore the pathway to becoming an effective dean is not clearly articulated. The need for potential deans to acquire the necessary skills to assume this senior leadership role is one of the underlying premises of the book. In addition to the deans themselves, administrators and other academics working with

deans can read this straightforward work to better understand the significance of the cycles in a dean's term.

Leadership challenges in post-secondary institutions are different from those of chief executive officers in business or other sectors. *Seasons of a Dean's Life* outlines some of these important differences and highlights the lack of appropriate research about senior leadership positions in educational institutions. The book emphasizes the particular challenges of running large academic units while juggling political, educational, and administrative priorities.

By understanding the importance of the various cycles of a deanship illustrated in this book, both prospective and sitting deans can better understand their successes and difficulties. The "spring" season (one to three years) involves a steep learning curve, the redefinition of relationships with academic colleagues, and new relationships with fellow deans; summer (four to seven years) allows initiatives that were "planted" during the first years to flourish during a time of stability and growth. Interestingly, fall is a season to take advantage of the investments made in the first two seasons. Fall's blazing colors are emblematic of the vibrancy that can exist in the latter years of a dean's term. Finally, winter is a time to prepare for transition, renewal and the passing on of legacies.

Seasons of a Dean's Life also considers the implications for both institutions and individuals when deans do not complete the full term, or the four "seasons," of their tenure. As the subtitle of the book indicates, by understanding *how* to build leadership capacity, deans can become more effective in their roles. The authors point out that the executive search for deans is becoming increasingly difficult. They also question whether the high demands made of deans (involving academic vision, leadership, program development, budgeting, and fundraising) have become so overwhelming that qualified candidates are choosing not to apply or are leaving their positions early.

As the head of a large continuing education faculty, I identify strongly with the issues raised in this book and have found it helpful to consider my own experiences in the framework provided in *Seasons of a Dean's Life*. I feel that the authors could have delved even further into other issues related to successful senior academic leadership. Perhaps more interviews including university presidents, provosts, academic colleagues, and students would help us gain a greater understanding of the reasons for the recent leadership crisis in higher education. In any case, a longer book could have analyzed a greater number of the political issues involved in building leadership capacity. I do look forward to reading more by Gmelch, Hopkins, and Damico: their work is innovative in bridging research and practical experience. They are part of a too-small group of researchers who can help us face the important challenges of educational leadership in post-secondary institutions.

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