Leading in a Time of Change: Assuming Interim Academic Administrator Positions

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ABSTRACT

This article is about interim leadership in academic settings, specifically at the level of dean of an educational program in nursing. The interim administrator is often an invisible actor in the history of a school or department. However, they are key players in maintaining stability, facilitating change, and providing a transitional pathway for the new, permanent leader. An essential theme is that interim administrators do real work that has consequences, and make real contributions to institutional history and continuity. This article provides guidance to those considering or serving in interim positions. Guidelines are suggested for the stages of evaluating and serving in interim positions: assessing the request to serve, making a decision about accepting an interim position, negotiating an interim position, and acting out the interim position, using the analogy of a theatrical play and guideposts for actors.

Change in institutional leadership can be a time of both uncertainty and opportunity. Uncertainty occurs because of changing institutional relationships and anxiety about the future, while opportunity arises from the anticipation and expectation of new leadership. The history and culture of an organization and the style and engagement of previous leaders will influence the period of transition to new leadership. Whatever the type of change, or the reason for it, the way in which the change is managed will influence the future of the organization.

Leadership change can be anticipated and planned, or unexpected and rapid. Leaders who voluntarily leave their positions usually do so for reasons such as career advancement, retirement, a shift in career emphasis, or those of a personal nature. Those who leave as a result of negative relationships do so because they are unable to achieve personal and professional goals within the organization, or are forced out due to poor performance, or conflict with organizational goals or the people they report to or lead. The reasons and conditions under which a leader leaves a position will affect the transition and the search for a new leader.

If a time gap exists between the departure of a leader and the selection of a new one, an interim administrator is usually appointed to assume the duties of the position. Interim time periods may vary in length from several months to several years and are established for a variety of reasons. The charge to the interim leader may be one of maintaining the status quo or, conversely, moving forward without interruption on all of the initiatives of the school. Some examples of agendas for an interim period are to clarify organizational needs, solve problems, realign priorities and resources, determine desired characteristics of a new leader, and conduct a search.

Individuals who assume interim positions are frequently selected from the internal ranks of the school or department. In a national study of deans in the United States (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002), the most frequent administrative background was Department Chair (60%) and Associate Dean (40%). It is logical to assume that this experience pattern holds true for selection of interim deans as well. The main difference is that when individuals are seeking a permanent dean position, they have prepared to interview for and negotiate the position. Those...
who fill interim positions often assume the position with little lead time to make an informed decision or prepare themselves for the role.

This article focuses on interim leadership in academic settings, specifically at the level of dean, director, or chair of an educational program in nursing. An essential theme is that interim administrators do real work that has consequences for the organization and make real contributions to institutional history and continuity. The goal of this article is to provide guidance to those who are considering or currently serving in interim positions.

Guidelines are suggested for the different stages of evaluating and serving in interim positions:

- Assessing the request to serve in an interim role.
- Making a decision about accepting an interim position.
- Negotiating an interim position.
- Acting in the interim position.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

A search of health and educational literature in the past 5 years revealed no articles specifically focused on the interim dean role. A Google search of the phrase “acting dean” produced several hundred links, mostly to news announcements of appointments of acting deans at universities across the United States. This large number verified the degree of change in academic leadership and the need for attention to the role of the interim administrator. According to the 2003 American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) survey of baccalaureate and higher degree programs in nursing (Berlin, Stennett, & Bednash, 2003), 70 of the 573 reporting schools (12%) had an interim dean.

Much has been written about higher education administration and the role of the dean, and this literature provides some perspective on the role of the interim dean. A national study of deans in the United States conducted by the Center for the Study of Academic Leadership (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002) provides much information about the characteristics of deans, their motivation to serve in leadership roles, and the challenges they face. For example, the study found that 41% of deans were women, and deans of nursing constituted almost half of all female deans. In addition, deans of nursing served in deanships longer than other female deans, and were more likely to retire from their positions and less likely to desire higher administrative positions or to return to the faculty. It is difficult to determine the percentage of deans who have served in interim or acting positions, but it was noted in the study that only 7% of deans believed the reason they were selected was due to their service as an interim dean (Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002).

Several articles written about the role of the dean may also be helpful to interim deans who are seeking to develop a framework for the experience. Rosser, Johnsrud, and Heck (2003, p. 10) identified seven domains of leadership for deans:

- Vision and goal setting.
- Management of the unit.
- Interpersonal relationships.
- Communication skills.
- Research.
- Professional and community endeavors.
- Quality of the unit’s education.
- Support for institutional diversity.

Wolverton and Wolverton (1999) studied the relationship of role conflict and role ambiguity to administrative stress and identified variables that increase and reduce stress. Stress, personal balance, and their relationship to being an effective leader have been addressed by Montez, Wolverton, and Gmelch (2002). This issue is significant to individuals serving in the interim position.

During their years in the academic setting, many faculty members assume leadership positions, either through faculty governance or some form of academic leadership (e.g., program director, department chair, assistant or associate dean). The skills, abilities, and successes developed in these positions often spark an interest in developing a career in academic administration (Bright & Richards, 2001). DeYoung (2000) discussed how nursing faculty should assess their potential interest in academic administration and the challenges of transitioning from faculty to administrative roles.

Nursing higher education is faced with a variety of challenges that require strong administrative leadership (Redman, 2001; Starck, Warner, & Kotarba, 1999). Competition for resources, increasing workforce needs, changes in health care, aging faculty, faculty shortages, and the need for new educational models are crucial elements of agendas across schools of nursing in the United States. Redman (2001) described the challenges faced by nursing deans and argued that strong administrative skills are needed to handle the challenges of “path-breaking work in integrating the discipline/profession into universities” (p. 57). When changes occur in the administration of a nursing higher education program, institutions risk loss of momentum in any or all of the above elements. In this context, the quality and ability of interim deans is crucial to the future of nursing education.
The AACN has addressed the needs of leadership in academic nursing through specific programming, a continuous series of executive development programs, an academic dean mentoring program, and a new Leadership for Academic Nursing Program (http://www.aacn.nche.edu/education/fuldrfp.htm). In 2002, there was a special program for interim and acting deans. The Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellows Program is also an excellent leadership opportunity for academic administrators (http://www.futurehealth.ucsf.edu/rwj.html).

ASSESSING THE REQUEST TO SERVE IN AN INTERIM ROLE

Individuals asked to assume interim positions need to carefully assess the type of change that has occurred as a result of the dean vacancy, determine if it was voluntary or involuntary, and identify the motivations for establishing an interim period. It is flattering to be asked to serve as an interim dean. I find those serving in interim dean positions in nursing have a high level of commitment to the school they are leading and a strong sense of service to assure the future trajectory of the school. However, these individuals often accept the position before conducting their own assessment, and before they are clear about the charge, the resources available, and the context for serving in the administrative role. Thus, requesting time to make a decision and engage in an appropriate assessment and negotiation process is prudent. The process need not be long, but it should allow time for personal reflection and advice seeking. This up-front investment in a serious assessment prevents misunderstandings and regrets later in the process.

The first step in the assessment process is to answer the key question, “Why was I asked to serve?” This question can be difficult to answer and requires astute political skills and the ability to realistically assess one’s own strengths and weaknesses. Interim candidates can be selected from inside the unit or from a variety of external sources. The rationale of the institution’s administration for selecting an interim candidate may reflect many motivations and agendas, which will affect the academic unit. See Table 1 for a list of reasons that internal and external candidates may be selected to serve in an interim role.

As part of the assessment process, it is best to validate with the appointing administrator the stated reasons for selection. In addition, these reasons should be validated with trusted advisors who can provide a reality check on the match between the reasons given and the individual’s potential to perform in the position. In the end, each individual must reconcile the perception of the institutional administration, his or her own self-perception, and the validated response of advisors. In some cases, a candidate perceived as weak by external sources may actually possess strength and great potential once given the opportunity to serve. I know of an example where an individual was perceived as a weak candidate; however, she demonstrated extreme courage and a quiet strength while in the interim position. The important lesson is that the interim position offers individuals a unique opportunity to grow and demonstrate untapped potential.

MAKING THE DECISION TO SERVE IN AN INTERIM POSITION

The actual decision about whether or not to accept the interim administrator position requires close examination of a variety of personal and institutional variables. I personally served in an interim dean position and found the decision-making process an important time for self-reflection. I requested a week to make the decision. Fortunately, the time coincided with a planned trip to a national conference. I was able to be away from the school to reflect on my personal goals, strengths, weaknesses, and the needs of the school of nursing. I made telephone calls to individuals I viewed as the school’s influential

<p>| TABLE 1 |</p>
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<th>Reasons for Selecting Internal Versus External Interim Candidates</th>
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<td><strong>Internal Candidates</strong></td>
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<td>• The strongest internal candidate is one who is knowledgeable, experienced, and well respected within the college and throughout the university.</td>
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<td>• The weakest internal candidate is selected so the individual can be controlled and will not challenge senior administration.</td>
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<td>• When the unit is able to select and recommend its own candidate, then an election or selection process is held. The successful internal candidate may be selected to represent a particular point of view among the faculty or may be able to build a bridge between differing groups.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>External Candidates</strong></td>
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<td>• The strongest external candidate is selected for knowledge and expertise to move the unit forward. This may occur when there are no individuals in the unit that are qualified or available to assume the interim position. External candidates are sometimes selected to implement radical change or reorganization as an agent of the institution’s senior administration.</td>
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<td>• Sometimes, in troubled or chaotic units, an external candidate is selected for the ability to create order and resolve problems. The individual may be brought in to assess the situation and advise central administration of the internal workings of the department.</td>
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leaders and asked if I would have their support during an interim period. These calls were beneficial in laying the groundwork for team building. I was also able to assess my personal support network and the effects the increased responsibilities would have on my family responsibilities and existing commitments.

As a result of my personal experience in an interim position, I have developed a strong interest in those who assume these positions. I have had the opportunity to listen to the unique challenges and triumphs that define the interim experience as I conduct workshop sessions and consultations with interim deans. Through informal discussions of their motivation to serve, several interim deans have highlighted the tremendous learning experiences available to them in this role and the opportunity to meet and work with other campus deans and administrators. Several felt they were, indeed, the one person within the unit who had the necessary experience and ability to do the job, while others were surprised by the invitation and frightened by the proposition. Whatever the situation, the questions presented in Table 2 should be a part of the assessment and decision-making process.

### NEGOTIATING FOR THE POSITION

When individuals decide to accept the position of interim dean or director, they should prepare themselves for a reasonable negotiation. It is essential to be clear about role expectations, timing, and compensation for the position. The negotiation process includes the following steps:

- **Candidates should express their interest in the position and their commitment to the institution.** They can share their assessment of the unit’s situation and what they believe will be needed during the interim period. In addition, candidates may detail their strengths and how and why they are suited for the position. This is an excellent time to raise issues of concern to faculty and students and discuss the approach they will take in communicating with all groups.
- **Candidates should discuss the charge and expectations for the interim position.**
- **It is important to ask for a letter of appointment that details the nature of the position, the expectations and charge for the interim period, and expected time commitment.**
- **Candidates also need to ask for and expect additional compensation for serving in the interim administrator position.** Published salary ranges for the level of position can be used to determine mean and median salaries by institutional size, type, and region of the country. Candidates must be prepared to request an administrative-level salary or supplement during the interim period.
- **Candidates should also consider negotiating for what will benefit them or their work following the interim period.** For example, requesting a sabbatical is an excellent way to ensure a transitional period to return to one’s previous role, following service as an interim dean.

### TABLE 2

**Questions to Guide the Decision to Accept or Decline an Interim Position**

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<th>Individuals considering assuming an interim administrator position, should ask themselves:</th>
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<td>- How does the role of interim administrator fit into my individual career plans and goals? Will taking the position require a delay in goal attainment in areas such as research and scholarly productivity?</td>
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<td>- Will another individual assume my duties while I serve as interim administrator, or will I continue to carry those responsibilities in addition to the interim administrator duties?</td>
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<td>- What is the specific charge for the interim period? How will I be evaluated at the end of my service?</td>
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<td>- How is the interim period defined (e.g., open ended or a defined period of time)? Individuals should ask about the factors that may extend the period (e.g., a failed search).</td>
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<td>- Am I interested in being a candidate for the permanent position? If so, is this an option? If it is an option, will the interim position be a positive or negative factor? The interim position is a double-edged sword. It provides an opportunity to show off one’s strengths and abilities, but it also demands hard decisions that may have risks associated with them. Often candidates discover their interest only after serving in the interim. Individuals should examine the history of the organization and whether or not dean-level appointments have been given to internal or external candidates.</td>
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<td>- What level of support and commitment do I have from faculty and staff within the school or department? It is a good idea to seek an answer to this question from key leaders in the unit prior to accepting the position. Interim deans appointed from within are faced with the challenge of familiarity. As a result, faculty may make assumptions based on previous relationships or friendships, and may be surprised when “their” interim dean does not benefit them directly.</td>
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<td>- What level of support do I have from the central administration and the individual to whom I will report? Individuals should try to seek input from other deans or directors regarding the workings of the academic leadership team at the institution.</td>
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<td>- What is the central administration’s view of the school, where it is headed, and what is expected to happen during the interim period? For example, in one case, the faculty expected to proceed with the school’s aspirations and programs, but the central administration viewed the interim period as an opportunity to scale back its commitment to the school in order to divert resources elsewhere. The individual who took the interim position did not realize she would be asked to cut the school’s budget and eliminate programs, and this put her at odds with the faculty who trusted that she would lead them forward.</td>
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or director. Other benefits may include research funds to catch up on work that was neglected during the interim administrative period, or resources to support academic travel or equipment.

SERVING AS THE INTERIM ADMINISTRATOR: ACTING LESSONS

The idea for “acting lessons” came from the experiences of two interim deans of schools of nursing who met regularly for lunch to share “acting lessons.” It was a lighthearted attempt to support each other and strategize about how to play different scenes in their new roles. This experience led to the conceptualization of the interim period as a play, with rules and guidelines for actors.

The interim administrator is an actor engaged in a play defined by the interim period. The play has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and fully engages the interim dean in a process of taking on a new persona for a specific time period. Just as actors must become the characters they are playing, so must the acting dean become the character of dean as institutional leader. Merlin (2001), in a book on auditioning, identified the basic elements that directors look for in actors at auditions; these elements also inform the acting dean role and include concentration, feeling of truth, spontaneity, specificity, energy, humor, courage, and skill (Merlin, 2001).

The individual who is “acting” in a position takes on a new identity (role playing) for a specific time period (the play). For example, interim deans are immediately thrust into a variety of “scenes” specific to the dean role, such as joining the academic leadership team with other deans, handling institutional issues, and providing responses for the nursing unit. If the interim dean is internal to the institution, there is the challenge of relating to students and faculty from a new and different perspective.

The interim administrator also must assume acting roles in community, fundraising, and social events, which require interactions to promote the unit and the institution. Many individuals are well suited for the multiple roles of the dean and may have an intuitive sense for developing skill in these interactions. Others may find it more difficult and may need to take “acting lessons” as a way of framing the new skills. More than one acting dean felt a need for a new wardrobe (costuming) to fit the dean role, and another held a rummage sale at the end of the interim period to sell off her “dean clothes” as a symbolic gesture of closure related to her acting experience.

The acting dean needs a framework for thinking about the work of the interim period. I have found it helpful to use concepts from theater arts and acting as a framework when discussing the experience with acting deans. There is usually a theme for the interim period that is drawn from the established charge. The cast of characters is diverse and consists of students, faculty, staff, community stakeholders, and the university community. The plot evolves from the relationships and needs of the unit and institution, and the internal and external forces affecting the unit. The tasks for each stage of the interim period are listed according to the beginning, middle, and end of the acting period.

In the initial stage or the “beginning” of the play, usually the first 1 to 2 months of the position, the interim administrator must:

- Introduce the role of the transitional leader.
- Explain the role of the acting or interim administrator.
- Establish relationships in the new role.
- Evaluate the level of support.
- Identify challenges.
- Set the stage and identify the course for the interim period.
- Establish goals for the interim period.
- Consider interest in the permanent position and explore the search process.

The middle of the interim period takes on a different character and the length of this period is the most variable, depending on institutional priorities to seek a permanent replacement. During this period, the tasks of the interim administrator are to:

- Take action.
- Minimize negativity.
- Support positive progress.
- Establish coalitions and partnerships.
- Evaluate progress toward goals and the charge for interim period.
- Participate in the search process if a decision has been made to seek the permanent position.

The ending period of the interim “play” begins as soon as a permanent administrator has been named. If the interim administrator has been selected as the permanent dean, then the ending phase of the interim period can be used as a transition period for the permanent role. Regardless, the individual needs to formally exit the interim position and establish himself or herself formally in the new, permanent role. If the individual was not selected or did not seek the permanent deanship, he or she enters a very specific period of termination from the role and position. The finality of this phase may be difficult and will require a focused exit strategy. During the ending period, the interim administrator’s tasks are to:
• Plan his or her exit and begin speaking in concluding terms.
• Prepare the transition for the permanent administrator.
• Plan the next phase of your career.
• Document successes and progress.
• Claim his or her accomplishments.
• Make recommendations for the future.

The interim administrator needs strategies for each of these stages that take into account the characters, plots, and themes unique to the institutional setting. It is also essential to determine who the audience is, how to communicate the play through playbills (e.g., appointment announcements, written materials describing the school and its agendas), and how to direct performances of the various scenes of the play. At each stage, interim administrators should remind themselves and others of their institutional stewardship responsibility as they provide leadership during the interim period.

In a guide to acting and auditioning, Shurtleff (1978) recommended acting guideposts for actors preparing for roles. These guideposts are consistent with the needs of interim deans and include the importance of relationship building, humor, communication, discovery, and mystery in the craft of acting. By conceptualizing the role from this perspective, interim administrators can consciously select the behaviors and approaches that will help in the “acting” role.

SUMMARY

There is often an interim period before a new leader is appointed in academic administration. The individual selected to serve as interim administrator is faced with a series of decisions and negotiations before agreeing to serve. After an interim position has been accepted, the individual needs a framework for taking on this “acting” role. The acting framework proposed in this article is intended to help individuals assume the interim role. However, it should not be interpreted as a pretend character or role. Interim administrators do real work that has real consequences.

Serving as an interim administrator is an opportunity for individual growth, which may lead to consideration of future administrative positions, career development, and the expansion of contacts in the institution and the community. However, such service may also result in changed relationships with colleagues and be a potential source of conflict when returning to a faculty position. It is important for interim administrators to have a strategy for leaving the position and reintroducing themselves to their colleagues as they return to their faculty position with all the baggage they acquired during their role playing in the interim position.

The issues facing academic nursing programs are significant and require strong leadership at the level of dean or director. The urgency accompanying the educational challenges of the profession is a special imperative for leaders in nursing. Where necessary, it is essential to have solid interim leadership so that agendas for the future of nursing are not disrupted or co-opted. Interim deans and directors in schools and colleges of nursing should be supported and mentored by other nursing dean leaders to ensure the continuity of professional nursing education.

Interim administrators are often invisible actors in the history of a school or department. However, they are key players in maintaining stability, facilitating change, and providing a transitional pathway for the new, permanent leader. Serious preparation for the role and smart “acting” will enhance the experience for all involved.

REFERENCES


