

Navigating the Interim Role in Higher Education

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Abstract

Interim administration appointments are becoming the norm in higher education. Without complete clarity of the role and the extent to which full administrative authority is granted, interim positions of leadership can be difficult to navigate. This article shares the challenges and lived experiences of two interim higher education leaders. Discussion is centered on lessons learned and offers practical advice to maximize the potential for personal and professional development in an interim leadership experience.

Administrative turnover in the world of Higher Education seems to be increasing in institutions across the nation. This increase is not just for lower-level administrative positions within a college or university. This is particularly true of mid to high-level positions in both public and private institutions. According to *Higher Ed Direct* (“College Administrator Data,” 2018), “top-level positions at colleges and universities are experiencing some of the highest employee turnover compared to other administrators” (para. 1). The report also discussed factors which influence these high rates of administrative turnover including “growing financial, faculty, Board and political pressures” (“College Administrator Data,” 2018, para. 3). While much has been written as to the factors influencing these turnovers, it is important to consider the stopgap solution that involves the utilization of interim leaders.

Interim appointments bring both positive and negative issues for the institution, college, or unit in which the interim will serve. From the positive side, it obviously fills the gap or void left by the former administrator. It also brings some sense of continuance and balance, particularly if the interim appointment is made from within the ranks of the faculty and staff. Another positive aspect of the interim role is that it gives the academic unit time to determine a

new course of action with someone at the helm who understands the culture and persona of the faculty and staff involved. However, challenges may arise in an interim appointment when some of those faculty and staff are not pleased with the selection, view it as a limbo period, or who do not concur with the vision and direction of the new leader. Huff and Neubrandner (2015) argued: “interims are expected to make effective decisions that have both short and long-term implications for the academic unit without the luxury of having the time to build trust or long-term relationships with the faculty and staff” (p. 10). Interim leadership is a delicate but important balance. Interim leaders must remember: “taking on a too passive or too active role can threaten the stability of the community” (Hibl, 2018, p. 1).

In this article, the authors (both of whom have served in interim roles) review some key strategies that will help ensure success in navigating the interim leadership within higher education settings.

The Challenges of Interim Leadership

Among the many, the most prevalent challenge in navigating an interim leadership role has to do with fully comprehending the definition and scope of the role. Asking the question “What does it mean to be an interim leader?” often leads to more profound questions. Upon appointment, is the interim leadership position a temporary placeholder designed purely as a form of maintenance until a permanent appointment can be made? Will the interim assignment come with full authority granted to act and to fulfill the leadership charges essential to that position? Will upper administration allow the interim to provide the leadership that is fit and necessary for the organization at that time? Understanding the intent and the extent of the interim leadership appointment can be daunting. Without clarity, the interim role can either come with the authority to make decisions that encourage organizational progress or can be restricted to a period of maintenance of the status quo (Spirou & Brown, 2017). Asking upper administration those specific questions will help the interim leader and others understand the role as well as the parameters and expectations of the leadership appointment.

Another challenge is the task to quickly and authentically familiarize with the organization. In their discussions of interim department chairs, Bullock, Stallings, Redish, Gregory, and Whitlock (2016) argued “the majority of faculty who enter into permanent department chair/leadership positions do not have preparation or even a clear understanding of the position” (p. 3). This could easily be said for most interim appointments in higher education. To successfully lead, one must have a solid grip on the status quo and the collective vision. If time is short and a transition period absent, the interim leader may need to be prepared to take a crash course in learning the organization’s structure, challenges, successes, history, and uniqueness in order to lead forward. It is imperative that the interim leader strives to develop a thorough understanding as to the capacity and authority role to be able to assessment challenges and to quickly recognize and seize opportunities for the success of the organization. This capacity to understand and acclimate to the organization itself allows progressive thinking idea generation, vision buy-in, solution-based negotiation, and collaborative engagement with key stakeholders which facilitates and cultivates professional growth and forward progress.

An appointment from within often provides potential stability in the organization as the interim already has an understanding of the organization, the faculty and staff, and the challenges as well as the opportunities they face (Bullock et al., 2016). However, in most instances, it is very clear that the interim appointment is truly interim: temporary and only until permanent

personnel is hired. When that is the case, members of the organization may fail to view the interim leader as a leader at all. This is not to imply that the interim leader does not have the leadership skills, potential, and ability to lead. Instead, the resistance stems simply from the perception that the interim leader is not really in charge.

So how does an interim leader continue to move the organization in a productive direction, especially in times of adversity, even if there is no promise of transition to formal or permanent appointment? It is at this point that the interim leader must move beyond his or her self-interests. The interim leader must come to the realization and acceptance that there is a higher mission, a higher purpose, and the focus must remain there. Some appropriate questions to ask might be “Why am I here?” “Why am I doing this job at all?” The interim leader must recognize that the efforts to continue moving the organization forward and upward in spite of no promise of permanency in the position is really for the benefit of the students and the faculty. Administrators in higher education, interim or otherwise, have a responsibility to create positive and meaningful experiences for students, staff, and faculty in accordance with an overarching mission established by the institution. Accordingly, as interim leaders, the “why” is much bigger than the trials.

Personal Perspectives

Steve Bain

In June 2019, I was asked to serve as interim dean of our College of Education and Human Performance. When I met with the Provost, we outlined some key strategies that would drive my interim role until a permanent dean could be found. My overall objectives would be:

- To support and encourage faculty and staff as they educate the students whom we serve.
- To prioritize and address issues related to recruitment, enrollment, and retention.
- To address budgetary and grant-related issues.
- To optimize the organizational layout of the Dean’s office.
- To foster an atmosphere of excellence, professionalism, and respect for faculty, staff, and students.
- To facilitate leadership, excellence, and visionary solutions as we address the challenges and opportunities we face over the next several months.
- To regionally, nationally, and globally accentuate and promote the CEHP.

Robert Burns (1785, para. 7) once wrote: “The best laid plans of mice and mine often go awry.” As interim dean, I discovered what every interim leader learns early on...while your initial plans are important, you must expect the unexpected. My provost had charged me with the doing the work of the dean regardless of the interim title. For the most part, the objectives I outline have (and continue) to hold in place. Certain college priorities I believed would be essential soon dropped in urgency as new, unexpected, and critical issues began to emerge. Accreditation issues, certification changes, faculty and staff concerns, budget challenges, and COVID-19 all had a strong hand in turning the rudder of my leadership boat. I quickly ascertained that all my training and experience had never prepared me for the crises that soon erupted across our state, our nation, and our world.

Some of the most important lessons I have learned over the past year are these:

- Be prepared for every form of challenge and opposition to your leadership approach, decision, and vision. Interim leaders must develop a thick skin. The interim role itself fits you for a bullseye and there are enough disgruntled, negative, and bitter people in your organization willing to take the proverbial “potshots” whenever they can.
- Always prioritize students, faculty, and your institutional integrity. No matter how complicated the organization, it all comes down to people.
- Seek collaboration on all major decisions.
- Build the team with people who are visionary, positive, and committed to hard work.
- Champion core values of integrity, inclusion, diversity, and respect. As the interim, you have an incredible opportunity to right some wrongs and advocate those who may have been marginalized, minimalized, or ignored in the past.
- Allow faculty to be human. Faculty are human beings regardless of how many degrees they have. Remember you do not know what they are dealing with in their personal lives that often drives their attitude, actions, and reactions in their work life.
- Be strong and make the hard decisions.
- Lead in such an effective way that you make the transition for the new leader easier...regardless of who that leader may be.
- Take time to take care of your physical, mental, and emotional health. Maintaining strong leadership is hard and it exacts a personal toll. Meditate, pray, laugh, exercise, and remind yourself you are not a super hero. Be gracious to yourself.
- Surround yourself with positive, encouraging, and healthy people who understand and support what you are doing.
- Have a plan to return to your former position if the interim role is as far as it goes. I continue to maintain my research, writing, and lesson content preparation.

Daniella G. Varela

When Dr. Bain was appointed interim dean, he asked me to be on his leadership team. We talked about the possibility of my serving as an interim associate dean, but that was quickly met with quite a bit of pushback because I was not faculty. Initially I wrestled with the perception that there might be a lack of confidence in me to lead in that capacity. As a matter of university policy, we agreed on a title for me: Special Assistant to the Interim Dean. My role came with some challenges as designed. My time was divided in half as Certification Coordinator and special assistant with a focus on enrollment, retention, and stakeholder relationships. While the task was a bit overwhelming, it was also a worthwhile experience. Worthwhile in that I benefitted from the opportunity of sitting in meetings with top university officials on a number of occasions, something that would have never happened in my former role. Even after 10 years as a university employee, it was only now that people knew my name. I visited with key stakeholders, reached out to local schools to start the conversation on partnerships, and established a social media presence for the college. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I was doing something important because I could see that others were seeing me in that same light.

There were those detractors who perhaps did not understand why I had been chosen by the interim dean. There were many who glared at me when I spoke up in meetings as if to

suggest I did not belong. My experience in that interim role forced me to lean on what I knew about myself but had repressed for too long: I *am* a leader, and I *can* lead. I had many conversations with my interim dean and greatly depended on his mentorship to continue helping me to believe in myself again, and project a confidence so that others believed in me, too.

About halfway through my interim experience, I was offered a faculty position within the college and I accepted it. As an approach to program improvement, the interim dean and I began the process of reevaluating my role as Certification Coordinator and thinking about ways to redesign administrative operations. When the job posted, my current position was upgraded to Director of Educator Preparation and the search for a replacement began. I spent the next several weeks serving as Interim Director of Educator Preparation. My first mistake was failing to accept the role and title, and failing to use it as an opportunity to initiate discussions about changes needed. Even though I had the full support of my leadership to use that period as an opportunity to start making important changes, I didn't. My team didn't see me as an interim director because I did not give them reason to. For 10 years of working in that role, I spent so much time thinking about all the ways we could make improvements to our program, and when I finally had the support and the (temporary) title to do it, the opportunities seemed to elude me.

These are some of the lessons I learned as an interim leader in both instances:

- Believe in yourself. Believe it when others see leadership potential in you. Believe it when others tell you that you've done good work. Believe it when people have the confidence in you to take charge and to be successful. And when you believe in yourself, don't believe it when others don't.
- Accept the support you have to make a leadership opportunity a worthwhile and meaningful experience. If someone has taken the time, energy, and risk to give you what you need to watch you grow and lead, make sure it's not in vain. Give them reason to continue believing in you.
- Find healthy ways to cope with stress. Be able to recognize when you need to take a pause, and be able to express that to your leadership in constructive ways.
- If you want the title, be willing to do the work. Titles will just be words on a page if you allow it. Especially if you have already noted neglected opportunities for program improvement, speak up and lead change. Reference the aforementioned points, and do the work.
- Appreciate the experience(s). There will be bad days and there will be good days. In either instance, there is plenty to learn. Reflect, adjust, and continue working on you and the leader you want to be.

Practical Advice for Interim Leaders

Develop and Clearly Define Realistic Goals

One of the most vital steps toward establishing a successful interim leadership experience is to develop and clearly define realistic goals. To be highly effective, these must be goals that are specific to the immediate needs of the organization. The developed goal(s) must be measureable and intentional and should stem from an authentic assessment of the landscape of the unit led. An essential aspect of developing and defining realistic goals often depends on what

the expectations and directives from the upper administration. Huff and Neubrandner (2015) advocate for “potential interims to ask for expectations in writing” (p. 14). Prior to accepting an interim role, there must be a clear understanding of the priorities from the upper administration. These goals take into account the interim may be longer than one expects and could last longer than a year (Rud, 2002).

Communicate Vision and Focus

Interim leaders may find this a complicated task as well, but imperative nonetheless. Vision must be broad enough to cover all the unique aspects of the organization, but specific enough to allow measurability to determine if progress is being made. Communicating the vision of the organization and the focus of progress aspired helps to solidify a collective understanding of what the immediate future holds. It is essential the interim leader meets with his or her leadership team in the first days of the assignment to review the vision and focus. While there may overall directives from upper administration, clarification and modification of those should be done in collaboration with those who will be charged to accomplish those directives. This also produces a form of “buy-in” from the team.

Cultivate Support from Upper Administration

Be present and be visible. In order to garner the support of upper administration interim leaders must be willing to engage in frequent and personal dialogue to communicate the needs of the organization, to share the vision of the leadership experience, and to outline the expectations and anticipations of the future. A strong line of communication, a conscious effort toward transparency and a presence of confidence and investment helps to build that crucial support.

Practice Self-Care

Take care of yourself. Relevant not just for interim leadership, but in our experiences quite easy to forget, self-care is important for physical and mental well-being. It is easy to get overworked in an attempt to take on the burdens of the organization. Find productive and healthy ways to reenergize and reinvigorate often staying mindful of the priority that is you.

Embrace the Experience, Own the Title

Embrace the title, too! Don't be afraid to fall into the role. Don't make it a point to constantly remind others that you are an interim. Change your email signature to reflect your bestowed title. Introduce yourself and present yourself as the leader, and assume the leadership role as it is designed to be held. Play the part and take good notes. In the midst of all the musts in an interim leadership experience, remember that this is an experience that will pave the way for more opportunity. This is a training ground. Embrace this as preparation for what's to come. Think about it this way: with interim leadership experience, your next opportunity will mean you “don't have to learn the position... just have to learn the institution” (Anyaso, 2009, p. 14).

Exude and Internalize Confidence

You have been delegated this authority. You have been asked to serve in this position for a reason. You weren't just randomly selected among the group. You were identified as a leader and as having the ability and capacity to lead. Demonstrate the confidence to quickly make judgment calls and act decisively, and demonstrate the humility to know when you need help and guidance.

Develop a Trusted Team

Key to any leadership position is the imperative task of building a trusted team. Build your team with people you can work with, whom will help to promote and embody the communicated vision and focus. Lean on your team, and allow the team to lean on you for mentorship, guidance, and leadership development. Surround yourself with those who can keep up, but also keep you grounded and focused.

Develop, Grow, and Manage Stakeholder Relationships

Of the primary responsibilities of leadership, managing the internal functions of the organization is inherent. Equally important is to represent the organization to external stakeholders. Interim leaders must recognize that there are many more external entities involved than just those that are with you in that particular place. Networking is therefore a key role. Spend the time necessary to keep the perception of the organization positive.

To that end, especially in a higher education setting, keep students in focus. You are well positioned to do good groundwork and to make meaningful connections with your most valued consumers. It is has been our experience as interim leaders that students deeply appreciate their solicited and respected perspective in policy development discussions. Students are stakeholders too and want to be heard. Interim leaders are wise to listen to them.

Have a Plan

Have a plan either to return to the previous role or to return to the new one. Stay optimistic but also grounded in the possibility that the interim position will not become a permanent assignment. As you work to take full advantage of the training opportunity, have a plan for what will come next. Make clear that there are no expectations of promise, and clearly define for yourself what will come next.

Post interim life. Often, faculty and staff may use the previous interim as a whipping post on which to blame their own shortcomings during the interim or previous leader's tenure. This is particularly true if there have been years of frustration on the part of faculty and staff. The position is itself a lightning rod for taking out frustrations.

Conclusion

Interim leadership is a critical component of today's organizational machinery. As higher

education changes, the role and the need for interim leadership increases exponentially both in scope and importance. There is no “one size fits all” manual or model for interim leaders. It is the hope of the authors that this article, and others like it, will provide some wisdom and direction for those assuming interim roles. Serving in the interim brings both challenges and opportunities, good times and bad. From this vantage point, interim leaders will develop new and dynamic views of the organization, the personnel, and the forward trajectory of both you as a person and your organization. Serving in an interim capacity will naturally compel you as a leader to reimagine your life mission, retool your personal and professional skills, rethink your career objectives, and grow in ways you would or could not outside of the interim leadership experience.

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