

The Relief of Consistent Leadership

In a tough year, a professor writes, not having yet another new set of green administrators has made a big difference.

So much about 2020-21 has been so difficult, yet from my perspective as a professor, our campus seems more effective and functional than ever.

How can that be? The pandemic has stretched us thin, remote teaching and learning has innumerable drawbacks and challenges, and, like many institutions across higher education, we are looking at [enrollment declines](#) that might spell budgetary disaster. Those circumstances don't exactly convey that we're in our salad days.

Nevertheless, there's one big reason I am upbeat: My university is finally experiencing a stretch of consistent leadership. After a decade of constant administrative turnover, we've had the same dean for five years and the same provost for four. They are both student centered and good at their jobs. It's an odd feeling — we're just not used to having good leaders stick around.

Like so many other regional public universities, my institution has been chronically plagued by administrators who have treated the place — and its students, staff, and faculty members — as a personal step ladder for their own careers. Either they were looking to break things as soon as possible so they could proclaim victory and quickly move on, or they only planned to stay around long enough to get a bigger retirement check.

Three years ago, when I wrote about this problem in *The Chronicle* — "[Why Relentless Administrative Turnover Makes It Hard for Us to Do Our Jobs](#)" — I

felt exhausted by our revolving leadership door. At that point, we had seen eight provosts over the course of 10 years (including the interim ones, some of whom lasted longer than the actual hires) and four “permanent” deans in my college.

It’s hard to assess whether any of the short-timers actually could have been good at the job, because they weren’t focused on the long term. Every fall convocation would bring a new set of initiatives. The experienced folks knew to wait for those plans to wilt and be replaced when yet another new administration took office. Even when the plans were good, we knew they wouldn’t be around long enough to become institutionalized.

Our current administration, however, started out on a different tack. The new provost and dean — recognizing that it takes a few years for strategic plans to yield genuine dividends — opted to keep the most effective ideas of their predecessors and then steadily build on those successes.

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There is a reason why colleges and universities develop strategic plans for five-year periods, or longer. Academe is structurally resistant to change. When a new administrator arrives on campus and attempts to fix things overnight, that usually just results in damage. Effective leaders take the time to learn the lay of the land and build relationships, pursuing change with a sincere appreciation for the strengths of shared governance.

So for the first time in 15 years, we have a provost who — upon being hired from outside of the university — took the time to learn who we are and develop plans in consultation with the relevant parties. Then he remained in the job to actually implement the plans and make course corrections.

Thank goodness we didn’t have a new set of green administrators when the

pandemic hit. It's been hard, but we've had steady leaders who have listened to faculty and student concerns and (at least in my opinion; I don't speak for every professor) responded appropriately.

Administrative stability has played a major role in our capacity to serve students. For example:

- Students are experiencing more consistency in course scheduling and availability. Classes are often still hard to get when sections fill up, but at least schedule changes make more sense than the year-to-year fluctuations we used to experience.
- When our dean commits to replacing an aging or dying piece of equipment, or to support the development of a new program, we now can rely on that commitment to last more than a year.
- Long-range curricular planning is no longer an exercise in futility.
- Under ephemeral leaders, we had to scramble for resources because that was the only way to get anything. Now with consistent leadership, we can settle in and focus on building plans that use resources more efficiently and are designed to be more durable.

Consistent leadership has also been critical for faculty interests — such as recruiting and retaining tenure-track professors.

Administrators with a long-term view on institutional success are positioned to allocate resources and political capital to increase the hiring of tenure-track faculty members. Like nearly every other large university, our campus has grown to rely heavily on non-tenure-track lecturers to balance the books. We all know that the under-compensation and marginalization of contingent instructors harms students, because [faculty working conditions are student learning conditions](#). Short-term administrators are usually loath to tackle this issue, because hiring tenure-track professors is expensive, and

it takes a few years to see new hires settle in and make their contributions.

Leaders who stick around for the long haul are more likely to see the benefits of enfranchising contingent instructors. Such leaders also are better positioned to take the long-term steps required — such as providing non-tenure-track faculty members with professional-development programs, offering avenues for career advancement, compensating them for service work, and changing policies to include them in institutional governance.

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Faculty equity across ranks seems like a distant dream, and we have a long way to go. But over the past few years, I've seen our administration make advances in supporting my non-tenure-track peers — because it enhances student learning and because it's fair. Those changes are not easy to make and can't happen overnight.

But I don't think they would be happening at all if we still were experiencing rampant administrative turnover.

I don't want to leave a false impression about my institution. Is everything roses here? Heck no! Do I have concerns and complaints about how my university is run? Absolutely. After all, I'm a full professor, so of course I've got a list of grievances (and some of them are quite serious) longer than a CVS receipt.

Regardless, I recognize how valuable it is to work with administrators who are far more functional than dysfunctional, who share with the faculty the goal of genuinely improving effectiveness rather than trying to squeeze out short-term gains.

I don't know how to hire administrators who are committed to the long-term

improvement of the institution. After all, at the interview stage, what candidate would ever say, "I'm planning to stick around only as long as it takes for me to get a more desirable position elsewhere." I'm sure our current leaders must have turned down opportunities to cut bait, and I imagine at some point they'll move on to larger pastures.

When that day comes, I hope they will have established a precedent so that their successors also will invest in — and stay long enough to carry out — long-term plans. Our students always deserve leaders who truly understand the institution before attempting to make their mark on it.