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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative inquiry based on reciprocal and interactive relationships. Seven associate deans or former associate deans were engaged in conversations about their roles in colleges of education. All are women from five public and two private universities. Through analysis of the conversations, five themes emerged: the role of associate dean as faculty member; the limits and expectations of the role of associate dean; the lack of intrinsic power in the position; the shadow nature of the role as the subordinate to the dean; and the associate dean's role as communicator and mediator. A critical incident technique was used to gain further insights into the nature of the associate dean's role and sources of conflict in the role. Some of the situations that were used dealt with: academic freedom and the undergraduate curriculum; racially insensitive practices by adjunct faculty; the rumor mill; and perceptions of authority. Among the implications are: gender is a factor in individuals' perceptions of themselves and of the role; peacemaker, a frequent sub-role for associate deans, is seen as a sex-related role for women; for women of color, race and ethnicity are often more salient than gender; and the dean influences feelings of role dissonance. (Contains 13 references.) (JLS)

# Leading from the Middle: Critical Mentoring from the Vantage of the Associate Dean

***Feminist Research and Collaborative Conversations—***

a work in progress



presented by
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at the 49th AACTE Annual Meeting, in Phoenix AZ, February, 1997.

## Introduction

Today, in this AACTE Session, we share our journey of looking at the associate dean role in colleges of education. The ideas come from our reflections, as well as, from other women who serve in the role. First, we describe the why and how we developed the study. Then, we communicate ideas from our initial, informal conversations.

As we moved into formal administrative positions, as associate deans in education, we discovered that this role was unmapped territory for two tenured teacher educators. Previous leadership experiences gave us the confidence to tackle the role and tasks. The dean appointed each of us. We serve at the "pleasure" of the dean. Thus, our role as associate dean became one of negotiated authority with sometimes an unclear job definition.

To assimilate the associate dean role, we wished to network with other associate deans. When we compared notes with colleagues, we noticed similarities. For example, we are all women, and except for one university, work with male deans. We have similar problems, accomplishments, and stories. It is difficult to know what about our jobs has to do with gender. Clearly gender, as well as race and age, does somehow work into the job. All of our jobs are contextualized in the colleges where we work. There can be no sweeping generalizations about the associate dean role. There can be understanding about what this role means to us, professionally, and to the places in which we work.

When we began our work, each of us saw the role of associate dean as one that requires inclusive appreciation of the strengths of faculty, in the multiple ways faculty manifest strengths. We believed that for our respective situations we must create a safe climate for the expression and appreciation of heterogeneous perspectives. We wanted to be sure that we heard and valued all the voices within our units. This required that we observe and reflect on perceived social status, past experiences of ourselves and others in a politically conscious and astute manner. Yet in the creation of a safe climate that protects individuals, we believe that we must include accountability for individual faculty action and a contribution to the *common good.*

Of course for teacher education, the *common good* always occurs within the greater societal context that schools inhabit. Elementary and secondary schools today live in the complicated and fast-moving world. In these schools—administrators, teachers and students must function in a decision making system that demands accountability. Frequently, the school decision making system imposes the requirement that the system must abide by quick decisions. The decision makers must handle unplanned responses from the communities; and embark with enthusiasm through new territory. Schools are dealing with standards, an increasingly diverse society, often declining resources, and challenges to the traditional role of school in our society. It is no different in the world of the university where we prepare teachers, think about the process, and devise new systems and strategies. In some ways, the additional isolation of college professors, the ambiguous roles of administrators who were once faculty, and the questions about the tenure system, adds to the perplexity of the college environment.

The environments that we endeavored to establish are ones where trust and respect will promote opportunities for faculty maintenance of personal cultural identities. We seek opportunities to appreciate the limitation of personal power to overcome institutionalized racism, sexism, while respecting individual identity perspectives. As we work, role disparity and the perception of faculty regarding the leadership role of the associate dean influenced the effectiveness of fostering diversity in the interest of colleagueship. We believe that to act effectively, for the best interests of our colleges, dialog and authority with faculty must be balanced and respected. We do not want to add to the risk of stagnation and inaction in our units.

## Comparing ourselves to the leadership literature

We rose to our positions through demonstrated leadership accomplishments. All of the persons in our conversations have a history of successes in diverse leadership arenas. In our disparate roles as associate deans, we demonstrate skills as transactional leaders who take care of routines, doing things right (Bennis and Drucker in Bass,1986). This aspect of the role is sometimes frustrating because it is not always intellectually challenging. Boredom sets in for us, when we have solve the problem, invent the system. We seek new opportunities to function as transformational leaders who do the right thing and to serve as catalysts for change (Bennis and Drucker in Bass,1986). This often results in a very full plate of activity for us. In other times and places, we have all shown influence, inspired, motivated (Bass and Avolio, 1994). We thrive on intellectual stimulation and most enjoy the thrill and excitement of change (Bass and Avolio,1994). To delimit our activity and to promote system adoptions of our own and others' innovations, we strive to consider individuals, to delegate, and to inspire (Bass and Avolio, 1994). Our goal in the spheres of our influence is to empower others so that they feel significant and that their work is exciting. We want to delegate, promote collaboration and recognize teamwork (Kouzes and Posner.1995). We accept the responsibility for making decisions, making the tough calls, and absorb the accountability for making the critical decisions that may be languishing in "academic time."

In the situations where inevitable conflicts arise, we promote strategies of collaboration, seeking balance between individual self interest and the common good. Sometimes however, we use negotiation, requiring individuals or sub-groups to give (Lucas, 1994).

We are not superwoman. Each of us sets the bar for excellence high. Occasionally, the bar is too high for ourselves or others and we may lose some battles to the status quo. We cope by setting a new vision and strive to create new meanings. As we work we are aware of our skills and seek to develop and deploy them effectively (Kouzes and Posner, 1995).

We are our often our own harshest critics. Have we acted with dedication, humility, openness and creativity? Have we protected the powerless in the traditional status driven academic system? Are we individualizing to the faculty, students, staff, with whom we interact? Are the strategies that we employ matched to the system? Is the setting a match for us? (Bennis, 1991;Kouzes and Posner, 1995) In our conversations we have evolved a support network that is affirming and that nourishes our successes (Kouzes and Posner, 1995). As we reflect on our experiences in the role, and in the conversations, we have identified personal rewards and challenges (Kouzes and Posner,1995). We are not tired, yet. Some of us wonder how we will continue to balance the need for opportunities for creativity and where our travels may take us.

## Methodology

Our study is a qualitative inquiry based on reciprocal and interactive relationships (Lather, 1991). The approach is conversational in tone with the explicit intent to validate both rational and cognitive epistemologies. These epistemologies are traditionally associated with academic (and male) research. We want also to show "the emotions, intuitive leaps and less verbalized feelings that have been linked with woman's learning" (Hollingsworth, 1993, p. 376).

Like the research of Janet Miller (1990), Sandra Hollingsworth (1994) and Michelle Fine (1993a and 1993b), we make no attempt to separate out (or bracket) the influence of our identities, our personal biases (Schultz, 1994). A defining quality in our efforts is to take what we learn through the associate dean group of women back into our colleges. In these ways our research approach is feminist (cf. Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1994 for a fuller description of key values labeled as "feminist") Our interest is in the role of self-conscious autobiography from leaders.

With that in mind. we engaged seven associate deans or former associate deans, in conversations about their roles in colleges of education. All are women from five public and private universities. The formal conversations lasted from one to three hours, although all the associate deans were familiar colleagues to the two researchers before the study. Informal and at-length talks about our roles formed a part of our relationships with these women.

During the interview conversations, we took notes. Through the analysis we show themes or commonly held ideas. From this analysis, we fashioned the four critical incidents. We did not take the stories directly from one person's account. We hope that the critical incidents will extend the conversation to participants of this conference.

## Analyses and Themes

Through our reflections about the conversations with colleagues, we identified five consistent themes across institutions. We experience these themes in greater or lesser degree with our colleagues. As we live in "the soup," we experience variations of these themes at different levels of saltiness. Some themes are more salient at different points in our tenure. The context of our work setting influences each of the themes.

### *Faculty member?*

Each of us has a deep understanding of our entire unit and its place within the context of the university. Are we still faculty? Yes, when faculty and staff may wish to diminish our authority. No, when we are pejoratively relegated to the "task manager" role. Are we ever not faculty? We do have our own scholarly agendas and accomplishments as faculty members. We are socialized to think like faculty. Our experiences and reputations as successful faculty members shapes the perceptions of the members of our unit. Often we have served as chairs of important college and university committees or in other ways demonstrated leadership skills outside our colleges. For some faculty our previous role as faculty member provides a comfort zone for collaborative activity. Other faculty see our success as professor as a threat.

### *Limits and expectations*

The expectations for the job overlay our effectiveness and accomplishments. The societal role that we have learned in our lives, places us stereotypically into the "helper" role—the princess behind the throne. Our experience with society's expectations for us is that we must not shine too much. The extent to which we absorb the societal stereotypes and the extent to which we have always challenged the "traditional" woman's role is mediated by age, cultural, social class, family identity, and our personalities. We are after all, educated, experienced women who frequently challenged systems and the status quo.

### *Living on the margin*

Constantly, we must get our tasks done, using power of persuasion rather the "stick." There is no power intrinsic in the job. We are neither fish nor fowl because we are not the dean nor are we faculty members or students. Sometimes we may give the bad news that the dean may not want to give or pick up the pieces once the dynamite has exploded. We enjoy feelings of success when coalition building works and when innovations work.

### *The shadow*

All agree that our role is "shadow"; we facilitate the tasks of the college with the authority of the dean. Our tasks are those that are frequently only noticed if they are not done. We develop or implement systems for accomplishing these. The dean defines our job and tasks. We also choose work through the latitude granted by the dean. The dean supports, sometimes mentors,

sometimes undercuts delegated decisions, and sometimes ignores us. Thus, we take on the perception in the unit and elsewhere that the dean sets. We are all loyal and trustworthy, otherwise we can not support the dean. There is only one king or queen. A key factor in our ability to obtain satisfaction from the job is the match with our partner—the dean—the match with the climate of the unit and the institution. We must negotiate the explicit and implicit norms of the unit.

### *Communicator and mediator*

Due to the strong role that mediation plays in our work and due to the ambiguous job definitions, effective communication strategies are crucial. We must be tactful in trying to establish and maintain relationships between and among faculty, administration, students, and the university community. We have different relationships with those with whom we interface and often different strategies for problem solving than the Deans we serve. Depending on the situation, this can create tension that is sometimes creative, sometimes frustrating. As in any organization, we must remember our place within the system. As mediators among and between the groups we may possess confidential knowledge, so we talk around and attempt to negotiate the ripples that emerge in the system. Our effectiveness as communicator is dependent on the climate established by the dean. Is the system of communication open? Secretive? What role does grapevine play? We mediate interpersonal issues the likes and the differences within our units. When we serve as ghost writer for the dean or the faculty, we set the expression of policies, procedures, or values. This is one of the more creative aspects of our role. When we state positions, implement unpopular policy, make decisions deferred by troglodyte faculty members—we face the risk of the label used to put women leaders in their place—accusations of arrogance and sometimes "rhymes with witch" follow.

## Critical Incidents

To represent the real world of our work place, we contextualized our problems and dilemmas in constructed "real life" situations. Our interview conversations supplied the fodder for these incidents. We fashioned situations that provide a "snapshot" of the associate dean's professional life.

### *Academic freedom and the undergraduate curriculum*

A faculty member comes into your office and shuts the door. He says that our undergraduate elementary education students are not doing well in the clinical field placements because the reading professor insists on teaching them that only the "whole language" approach is legitimate. This reading professor has received criticism from classroom teachers who supervise our students. They say our graduates are not prepared to teach primary grade level students work attack skills.

You suspect that this is true because you know that the reading professor refuses to even talk about phonics. Many of the city's schools teach phonics. Students have complained to you that they feel inadequately prepared. But it is also true that the complaining professor never directly confronts the whole language issue with his colleague. He has only made occasional snide remarks about whole language during department meetings.

### *Racially insensitive practices by adjunct faculty*

A program chair comes to you about student complaints against an adjunct faculty member who has worked at your university for many years. It seems that in his class of 27 students—three received "F." All three of the students are African-American and two of them say that the grades are racially motivated. A white student, who did not do well in the secondary math methods class, received an "I." The white student re-submitted the work to raise her grade. The

program chair has arranged for the students to talk to the adjunct faculty member and wants you to be at the meeting. In talking with the adjunct, yourself—before the meeting—it becomes clear that race is indeed an issue, although not one admitted by the adjunct. It is also true that he has allowed another student to avoid a failing grade by giving an "I."

### *The rumor mill and faculty teaching*

Gossip among students and advising staff persists that a young untenured faculty member is a "sexist." An advisor comes to your office and says that a stream of students paraded through her office to complain about this faculty member. You know that advisors tend to place students in other sections of this required course or to advise firmly committed late juniors and seniors to take courses with this faculty member. You know that student evaluations show that some students perceive the faculty member's class as hard-hitting on gender issues; however, there are many comments of learning much. Only a few that say that "gender" pervades the class. You have met with this faculty member and offered to discuss alternate ways to discuss "controversial issues." In the past, you have discussed with this advisor the importance of trusting faculty, rather than assuming that students' words represent the "whole truth" about the classroom.

### *Perceptions of authority*

Welcome to the university, a full professor says to you—as he hands you a bag of gourmet coffee beans. You thank him for the present. A few days pass and the professor comes by to say—you haven't made any coffee for us.

As days go by, you notice that the work you have given your secretary is accumulating. Particularly, the adjunct faculty files are incomplete. When you raise the issue with the secretary, she says—maintaining the file is your job.

A faculty member comes to you and asks you to reserve a seminar room for his meeting and oh, by the way, could you also order the coffee.

Faculty often introduce you as the Assistant Dean.

### *When you can't deliver the news...*

Because of the growing enrollment in the college, you hired a part time assistant to handle some of the staff details related to certification, documentation of clinical supervision and other tasks. You hired a well-qualified person who works well with you and other staff. He does a great job. As the work increased, the part time assistant assumed more responsibility. The position evolves to an unofficial administrative assistant to the Associate Dean that continues for nearly two years. Funding is tight and the discretionary dollars to fund the assistant vanish. The dean and you are looking for alternative sources for dollars for at least another year. The assistant discovers that the position will be cut. He is upset that he did not find out about the funding problem immediately. As a friend, you might give the information, but in your college the custom is for the dean to choose the timing on delivering funding cut messages. In fact, the dean is still seeking alternative dollars. The assistant threatens to quit. He blames you for not telling about the dollar shortage immediately. Your personal and professional relationship ruptures.

## Questions to consider for each incident...

1. What do you say to the professor, student, and/or staff member who comes to your office.
2. What do you (or do you) report to the dean?
3. What do you say to the person who is the target of complaints?

4. What do you think is the best resolution?
5. What do you say at a meeting that seeks to mediate a dispute?
6. How do you separate the personal from the professional—or do you?

## Preliminary implications

For each of us, our gender seems to be a factor in our perceptions of ourselves and the job. Sometimes we feel that we may accommodate the more outrageous requests for performing tasks like duplicating materials for faculty who complain they don't have time—stopping short of washing the windows—to keep the peace. Peacemaker is a role that we have often learned at our mothers' knee.

For women of color, race and ethnicity is often the salient issue over gender. The most used strategy for confronting racism is to do the job better. Additional strategies employed include: ignoring the racism and sometimes confrontation. The strategy selected matches the context of the racial discrimination.

The dean influences our feelings of role dissonance. Is the dean a supporter, mentor, competitor, effective leader as perceived by faculty, upper level administration, and by ourselves. We try not to fall into the trap of the complaining constituents who say—if I were queen, I would do it better—probably just differently. Mistakes are an inevitable part of leadership.

Can we foster effective means for confronting sexism, racism, agesim without always being en pointe? We wish to respect academic tradition for the thoughtful contributions to conceptual frameworks, keen analysis, and the visionaries within our constituencies. The troglodytes, always with us, though may be our toughest challenge. Will we return to our scholarship as faculty members? For those of us who were not faculty members, will we seek satisfaction as faculty, move to other leadership roles in higher education? We are women of action so we look for situations that embrace our energy. We appreciate the challenge of our work—for the moment.

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## The interview questions

### *Key words*

Critical incidents and real episodes; attitudes and strategies that promote effective colleagueship; common good; sexism, racism, ageism; all voices heard.

1. How do you see your role as mediator as associate dean?
2. How does gender affect your role as associate dean?
3. What strategies do you use to counter bias toward you, as a female administrator, or colleagues and students?
4. What are situations for which there remains a sense of dilemma, unresolved incidents where there are no available answers?

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