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Jeffrey D. Senese Ph.D.
Johnson & Wales University - Providence, jsenese@jwu.edu

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Trading in One Set of Keys for Another: Suggestions for Success Self-Management of Senior Academic Job Changes and Transitions

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Jeffrey D. Senese, Ph.D.

Abstract

This essay discusses the transition process for academic vice presidents from the perspective of an academic vice president. Given that many institutions do not adequately plan for the exit and entry of academic vice presidents, and the lack of literature on this topic, as well as the importance of this position at many institutions, this essay is offered as a beginning for further study.

The movement of academic administrators from one institution to another is done with perhaps more regularity today than in past years and decades. It has been argued that while many academic vice presidents spend most of their careers at the same type of institution, it has is also been the case that many have moved among several institutions (Allen 1984, 9). This job change activity is apparently similar for academic leaders at many levels whether they are department chairs, coordinators or directors of programs, deans and with particular respect to vice presidents/provosts. It may be that job changing is the result of the challenges inherent in such positions given that some have argued that the position of academic vice president is "the toughest job in any college or university" (Allen 1984). Conversely, one can also make a case that senior academic leadership positions are the most rewarding and interesting as well as important administrative positions at colleges and universities. It is clear that successful transitions into and from such positions are critical to colleges and universities and that the senior academic leader is an important position in every academic institution (Miller and Pope 2002).

Academic leaders often, and rightly should, feel a sense of obligation to both institutions involved in a job transition. Similarly, once one "crosses over to the dark side" (Dowdall and Dowdall 2005) to fully embrace an administrative career track the value system of those who are successful requires full dedication to the leadership role requiring one to take on both the responsibilities and trappings commensurate with such positions rather than hold onto a more faculty-centric approach and mind-set.

This paper was written in part while the author was in an academic vice presidency at a previous institution and finished once the transition to a new vice presidency, at a new institution, was completed (e.g., after one year in the new position). While the perspective of this paper is decidedly from the perspective of an academic vice president at private institutions, one can argue that the issues of transition are similar for many academic administrative positions both in higher and secondary education. That is, leadership positions that work directly and broadly with faculty and staff across large multifaceted institutions have similarities in responsibilities, expectations and complexity.

One can also reason that the basic job of academic leadership has consistent rhythms and routines that are known to the academic vice president in transition. Broscio and Scherer (2003) have suggested that transition advice that addresses confidence, mindset and emotions is more valuable than nuts-and-bolts topics. Certainly these suggestions have implications for academic administrative positions of many types and levels. The premise of the current article is to provide a set of illustrations of what may be important when one moves from a senior academic administrative position at one institution to a senior academic position at another institution.

There is very little published research or conceptual articles on job change of academic administrators and much fewer on senior level positions. "It has been more common to ask current position holders whether they are considering a position change or whether they would again accept an administrative appointment" but more typically the questions are about a presidency (Cejda, McKenney and Fuller, 2001). There is even less literature on the position of vice president for academic affairs or provost and job change at that level. This lack of focus in the literature implies that there is a place for discussions on topics of interest concerning these positions such as is offered in the current paper.

Moreover, and given the broadening role of vice president for academic affairs or provost at most institutions as the internal operating officer and the large range of responsibilities and personnel that they typically oversee for their institutions (Martin, Samels, & Associates 1997), it is important to support smooth transitions based on more consideration than the simple process of handing in one set of keys for another. Institutions are sometimes inattentive to the proper orientation of a new academic vice president to their culture and organization and perhaps also less than focused on the necessary transition work with a departing provost. Given this reality, it is incumbent upon these leaders to focus on their transition and to bring the necessary transition skills to their new institution and to close their time at the departing institution in a way that places it in the best position possible.

Job Change

There is limited literature on job change in higher education at administrative levels (Arden 1997). This is curious given the potentially far reaching affects that senior academic administrators and the individuals that typically occupy these positions have on institutions and the fact that change in these individuals is generally disruptive to higher education organizations. What the literature shows is a conceptualization on job change in higher education in terms of academic affairs administration that focuses on change from faculty to administrative roles rather than in different administrative positions (Carroll 1991).

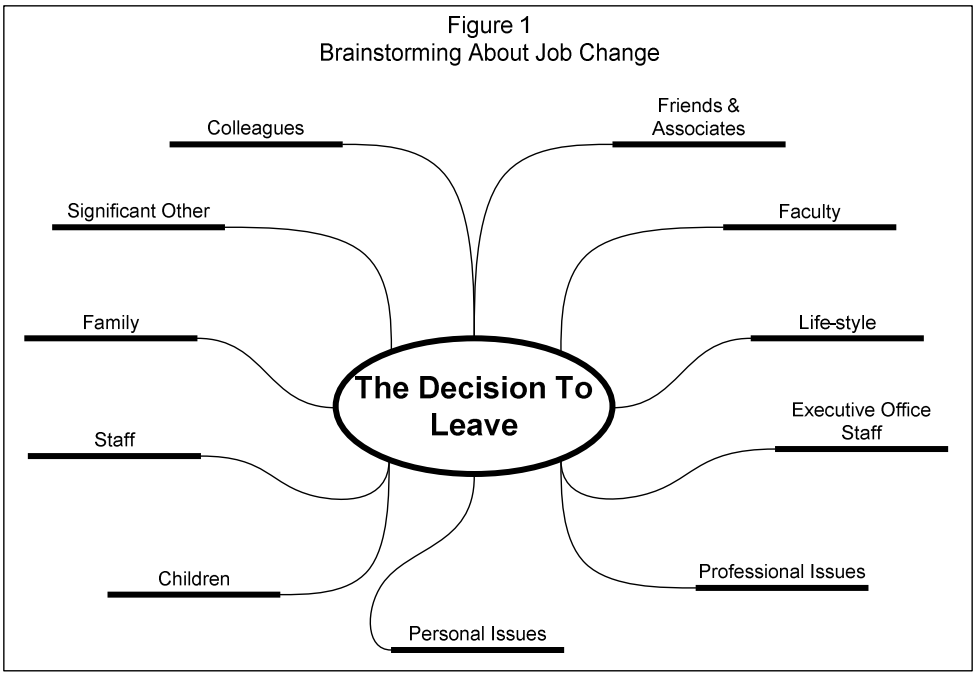
The more general literature that exists on job change shows there is much to be said concerning position changes. For example, job changes may hold positive outcomes for employees, such as job enrichment, fulfillment of development needs, more satisfaction, or improved labor market opportunities (Campion & McClelland 1991; Cordery, Stevastos, Mueller, & Parker 1993). For academic vice presidents this might involve an opportunity to work in the context of a larger or broader institution, working with an experienced president or simply a change of location and a new set of challenges.

Conversely, job changes can also be costly on both the institution and individual given the demands of transition and the time lost in forward momentum during the change (Van Dam 2005). As most vice presidents "settle-in" to their positions, their institutional positional power, in the very best sense of the term, increases as they work successfully with others to implement initiatives, lead change and become part of the institutional culture and operational structure. Transitioning from one institution to another begins this process anew and it is challenging to face new concerns, faculty and staff and colleague vice presidents without a developed foundation at the new institution. This also impacts the institution that the vice president is leaving in the sense that it creates a potential gap in the core division of the institution that may lead to struggles over focus, positioning by other areas of the university and could distract the president.

Van Dam (2005) describes job changes within the Rusbult and Farrell investment model and in that view he focuses on job changer's attitudes toward their new positions. Under the investment model there are four basic parameters that one considers in making a job change: job rewards, job costs, alternatives, and investments. The model holds that when job rewards and investment are high and job costs are low and alternatives are unavailable the job holder will continue in their current position. While ultimately one might make a change from one institution to another despite positive evaluations of the four concepts of the investment model, when it comes down to it some are likely to change a job in an academic administrative position when it is perceived the job rewards of the new position are greater than the current position despite the costs of changing jobs or the investment of time and energy in the current position. Some forego new positions because the rewards are not great enough or their investment in the current position is high. Job changers could rationalize their decision based on the reasoning that, not unlike faculty, academic administrators today hold somewhat ubiquitous positions that translate more readily and easily from one institution to the next than has perhaps been the case in the past. It is important, that one should keep in mind that every institution has its issues and challenges and these do not really become clear until after one spends several months in the new position. These problems cannot really be considered in the job change decision because they are hidden from outsiders which is what the interviewee is to the new institution they can influence the decision to stay at an institution.

Job Change Considerations

Before discussing the specific issues surrounding academic administrative job change and transition, a few suggestions are addressed given their importance in making the decision to leave one institution for another. The key decision should involve the important areas of one's life: family/significant others, personal concerns, and professional issues (See Figure 1)



One of the key considerations one needs to contemplate in making a transition from one institution to another are the affects that such a transition will have on one's family and/or significant others in life. Strong family ties to one's current institution and/or community should not be easily discounted or discarded and this is especially true when a cross-nation, regional or area move is required. In thinking about leaving one should understand that it will disrupt the comfortable routine, assuming one exists in today's hectic world, in one's personal life for some time and at least during the first year at the new position. This consideration is also doubly difficult in two career relationships when the decision involves resignation without a new position of one partner in exchange for the new position for the other.

Leaving has to be considered by the family. When one is moving closer to "home" or to a more attractive location it may be easier to leave one position for another. But that is certainly not always the case and even in such situations it is likely that strong ties to the current community, colleagues and the institution have developed. I have found that it is also important that the new position be clearly seen by family and/or significant others as an improvement over the current position in terms of the size, scope, scale and/or quality of the new institution. Prior to applying for or agreeing to be considered for a position one should also have the conversation about who should follow whom in two career households. It is also important for children to be included in some level of appropriate conversation about moves that may occur prior to the final decision, regardless of their ages, because this will likely affect one's personal life and professional transition and orientation at a new institution if it is not well managed and addressed.

Another issue that is important in making a transition from one institution to another is that one needs to fully consider the life-style affects it will have. For example, in a current position, assuming a few years of service, one is likely to have figured out how to balance exercise with reading/writing with meetings and events such that while full of activity the schedule is known. In a new position events, expectations and the alike will be both unfamiliar and actually different

than one's preexisting routines and may not be apparent until after one travels a year through these meetings, events and activities not to mention a different commute to work and settling into a new home if that is necessary. The challenges of a new position are many and learning who the "players" are at the new institution, which events are important, and working on relationships with colleagues and the president must be met. One needs to count on at least one year of a demanding, hectic and ambiguous life in a transition.

There are also professional issues in moving from one institution to another. One is likely, if at one's current institution for a few years, to have developed a very good relationship with others and to have developed a sense for the boundaries that one has, or does not have, in working with colleagues to keep the institution not only running but focused on continuous forward improvement. The concept of team in many ways should be developed, or some alternative work groups that have allowed things to move successfully forward. After a few years one can also develop strong relationships with the faculty and particularly influential senior faculty and their leadership groups. External relationships with regional and specialized accrediting agencies and the institution's board are also likely to be established after a few years. The influence and capacity earned at one's previous institution is usually considerable and comfortable.

In a new position, one will have a different faculty and academic colleagues and staff to work with. One's supervisor (the president in the case of the academic vice president) will be different and they will likely have various issues on their mind and an agenda as well as perhaps a different working style that must be accommodated. It is challenging in academic leadership positions to enter, and learn the environment and people and simultaneously make what might be perceived as necessary changes within the first few weeks or months. While there is no doubt that appropriate changes will likely need to be made, and will often be expected, during the first year, big changes in academic organizations are best served cold and after due deliberation and consideration. The trick of making changes at the beginning of assuming a new position is to make positive changes quickly and those which are surrounded by more controversy more slowly and as a vehicle to build leadership and relationships before taking action. More positively, one has the advantage in a new position of starting over and setting a forward oriented agenda that is different from one's predecessors. Most institutional cultures will understand and expect change with a new academic vice president.

Another consideration that is apparent in transitions on the professional side of the ledger is focusing on personal style and issues that matter. Coming into a new organization with personality guns ablaze and an "I am going to fix this" attitude is perhaps not the best approach to academic administrative positions in most cases. We depend, as academic leaders, on the collegial and collaborative participation of our colleagues in initiatives. There is no question that we are leaders and must take the responsibility to make decisions and quick decisions on administrative matters in many cases. There is also no question that when one should consult and collaborate and that is not done, especially in the initial year of transition, there are greater and longer-term costs. Once one settles into a new position one can be more comfortable with expressing concerns or pursuing important professional agenda items. This transition should happen fairly quickly and it is important to remain patient, observant, flexible and ready to begin to make an impact on the new institution.

Making a Successful Transition

Public or organizational announcements of one's departure should be kept confidential as long as that is feasible and should never occur before the job offer and contract/offer letter at the new institution is finalized. It goes without saying that one's president should be consulted as early in the process as possible to avoid any sense of disloyalty or lack of commitment that may be assumed if that is not done. Informing the president should be very carefully considered. Some presidents will be supportive and helpful, and others will see your seeking a new position as problematic. I have found a very direct approach and simple face-to-face conversation worked well with the two presidents I have had to tell that I was considering a new position. Keep in mind also that many public and a few private institutions have open records approaches to searches and with the Internet, job candidacy could be well known before it is announced.

It is also important that the announcement should not interfere with important campus events (e.g., graduation, baccalaureate, etc.). This is invaluable because it allows one to personally discuss the job change with the president and then with colleague vice presidents as well as direct reports (Deans, directors and so on) given that these individuals depend upon the academic vice president and need time to consider the change that departure will have on them and their responsibilities. Some, hopefully few, colleagues and direct reports will treat a leaving vice president as irrelevant, but these staff should not drive the agenda for the transition.

In the months or weeks that lead up to one's departure, one should be intensely focused on institutional priorities and the fulfillment of as many commitments one has made over the years as possible and feasible. If you arrive at the office early in the morning and leave in the evening continue to do so. In essence, one should attempt to retain as much of the routine leadership practice one has established during the last weeks in the position. This assures faculty, staff and others that the academic area will not be disrupted during the run up to departure.

It is also very important to follow through on difficult personnel situations that include terminations, writing thorny but honest evaluations and promoting staff that well deserve the attention. During this time, it is crucial that as many transitional meetings occur with the president as they desire, and it is the vice president's responsibility to provide as much transitional information as possible to ease the task of working with one's replacement once one has departed. The goal must be to leave the office and position in as favorable a posture as possible for whoever follows and for the colleagues one leaves behind. Few academic administrators would welcome coming to a new vice presidency where the previous position holder did not finish important priorities and leave the office in a strong position at the institution.

At the end of time at one's former institution one is often given an opportunity or several to make remarks to colleagues, staff, and faculty. These should be taken advantage of, thought about and carefully considered. It goes without saying that one should thank colleagues for their support over the years. But one's goal in making remarks near the end of the time in a position should be crafted to strengthen the institution and academic affairs. One should take care to think about what will be said to colleagues as final words and how such remarks can strengthen both the academic vice presidency for the person that follows as well as make the institution

stronger. It is amazing how one's credibility increases when one is about to leave an institution and that should be used to benefit the institution that one is leaving. There are three key considerations one should make in the lead up to departure: (1) focus on on-going goals; (2) the transition to a new vice president rather than dwelling on your tenure, and (3) publicly thanking the president, faculty, staff and others. There is absolutely no cost and every benefit in attempting to leave the institution strongly and to promoting its agenda and values.

Once one leaves one should recognize that faculty, staff and other direct reports and even the president may continue to ask for your time. One should count on phone calls, e-mails and other communications from former colleagues. In my case, I openly responded to all of these queries in the first few months and then began to only respond to questions that I deemed either important or those that required my input. After the first few months I rarely responded to operational questions about my former institution although I always responded cordially and positively when hearing from my former colleagues. I have, however, always fully participated in any legal actions that may have resulted at former institutions even though it was not required because these situations have the potential for large negative impacts on an institution and as a matter of integrity. I have also worked with my former presidents when they have requested my input or assistance. After one leaves an institution one is not unlike a student alum in the sense that if the institution does well and becomes stronger that enhances one's record and hence positive developments should be celebrated.

Preparation for the New Position

During the first few months after entry into a new position, newcomers are focused on mastering their jobs, developing relationships and learning about the organization as a whole, and only after these tasks are accomplished do they begin to settle into their new roles (Feldman 1976). This sentiment is no less true for academic vice presidents than it is for other academic leaders. That does not mean that one will have the luxury of completely focusing on job mastery to the detriment of actually doing the job and making decisions. It is important nonetheless to make certain that one does not loose sight of the need to continue to learn about the organization one is going to join as well as throughout the first year after taking a new position.

Upon entering a new job and organization, newcomers typically experience some degree of surprise (Miller and Jablin 1991). The surprise factor is ubiquitous in any job transition. When one interviews with a new institution they are in a "courting" mode to a large extent, giving candidates only a glimpse into their culture and in some cases protecting their institution because job seekers may remain outsiders if they are not offered or do not accept the position. While it has been my experience that one can anticipate large surprises, if one does ones' homework about a new institution, it is also likely that the true nature of the culture and organization cannot be known until one is of the institution. Be prepared for surprises and do not let them consume the transition.

Organizational socialization to one's second or third or more academic vice presidency is in some ways similar to one's first position at this level at least with respect to learning the culture and reality of the institution and position. Morrison purports that "organizational socialization is generally defined as the process whereby newcomers learn the behaviors and attitudes necessary

for assuming roles in an organization" (Morrison 1993, 557). In the case of the academic vice president/provost, the luxury of knowing the behaviors and attitudes of the university is somewhat limited prior to arrival. The president, search firm if one was used, and colleague vice presidents can help one understand the organization prior to arrival and in the early months as can the deans and faculty leadership. One also needs to keep in mind, however, that they are part of the organizational environment and some are focused on positioning with the in-coming vice president in these early discussions or in the information they share. It is also important to have early pre-start contact with Office of Academic Affairs staff to ease some of this transition and to improve one's reading list. These individuals as well will potentially be sensitive to these requests and this can be complicated if an incumbent in the office was a candidate for the vice presidency.

Since by definition, socialization involves the processes of learning and adjustment, both of which require information, one needs to request as much information as is available prior to arrival and in the first few weeks of a new position. Relatively little is known, however, about how new comers obtain the information that they need (Morrison 1993). Information reduces uncertainty (Berger 1979) and it may make up for the fact that new job holders are not provided all the information they need to master their job. To compensate for the need for information, one should both depend upon the established meeting routine unless it is absolutely necessary to change it or if one does not exist, and listen as intently to as many of the faculty, deans and staff that one can in the first weeks and months. For example, in addition to formal meetings, I have found it very useful to have small faculty luncheons, staff breakfasts and other less formal or scheduled contacts with others.

Keep in mind that established employees may not share information, however, because they may not remember what it was like to be new to the institution and they also may be reluctant to disclose information until they know more about you as the new comer (Feldman, 1976; Moreland & Levine, 1982). The other part of the equation here is that many of your colleague vice presidents and deans may not or will not really appreciate the complexity of the job of academic vice president. They also have their concerns and power bases which are sometimes in competition with the academic area and they are likely to have gained during the time that the former vice president announced their departure or during interim leadership if that was done. While one can readily argue that most presidents understand the academic vice presidency, and especially since many have served in the position, they also sometimes forget the difficulties and subtlety inherent in the position as being one that is between faculty, student and staff demands and those of their office, other vice presidents and the larger institution.

I have also found that one can learn much about a new institution by reading vociferously about the institution, community and regional higher educational market one is entering if it is different. It is important that one read every institutional document, historical or otherwise, that one can get their hands on because such a process helps inform questions and conversations that one needs to have with colleagues, the president, faculty and those who report to the academic vice president. In addition, there is a time in the process of reading institutional reports and documents when they start sounding familiar. These documents can be obtained through one's new president, an executive assistant, associate vice president or the deans and directors as well as faculty and in some cases student organizations.

More specifically, Miller and Jablin (1991) suggest several strategies that should be considered to collect information. Both before one arrives and after information can be sought through: (1) asking direct questions, (2) asking indirect questions about how things are approached or not, (3) asking third parties or colleagues outside of academic affairs, (4) testing limits or creating situations where others must respond, (5) disguising information seeking through conversations about broader topics or self-disclosures, (6) observation of the environment and the actors within the environment, and (7) surveillance or walking around the campus with particular attention to academic areas.

An additional technique that has been used with some success is a tactic know as "Garfinkeling." Garfinkeling involves the deliberate breaking of stated rules to discover both how salient the rules are and when there will be a reaction to the difference (Garfinkel 1967). This technique should be used very carefully and it behooves the academic vice president employing this approach to inform one's president about the use of Garfinkeling and to focus it on academic issues. An example of the application of Garfinkeling that I have used is to initially deny what have been routine stated rules for budget requests for entertainment and ask for justifications beyond the requirements and to take time before I finally approve those that make sense. This allows one to begin to educate staff about what is important in a larger context (e.g., entertainment for university business should link to larger purposes) and creates a context where the culture learns that you are focused on larger issues.

Completing the Transition

The process of settling into a new academic leadership position begins to happen after the first six months or so and when the Deans, directors and staff understand that you are not going to destroy the institution and that you will take the time to do the necessary homework and consultation before taking actions. Throughout the job transition it is important to focus on forward momentum for the University and especially once a level of institutional comfort has been reached. This might involve a review of strategic planning for academic areas, program review discussions or revenue modeling for each school or program if that has not been done. It is important once one is "part" of the institution that one begins to move more directly, and quickly to leading forward improvements.

In order to finish the transition to the new institution one may, as Feldman and Brett (1983) postulate, adopt one of the broad categories of coping strategies involving work habits, focusing on some responsibilities and not others, seeking social support and other assistance or even rationalizations. They found that many job changers spend longer hours on the job but that they are more adept at delegating and building a team to address their responsibilities. Whatever the approach it is important that one keep in mind that perhaps more than any other person in a college or university, the vice president for academic affairs has the opportunity to make a significant difference in the institution's development, and there are few positions which carry more rewards (Allen, 1984, p. 15). Some argue that the role should be broadened and it ". . . should consider the emerging role of the chief knowledge officers as a model for leadership" (Stevenson 2000). In the end academic vice presidents, provosts or academic deans are typically appointed and have been appointed for many decades to relieve the president and institution of

the burdens of administration (Eliot, 1908). They should work to lead their institution from the first day to the last and through the end of their career and at each institution they serve throughout their careers. Academic leaders are generally thoughtful people who are able to take a broad view of their institutions. This article suggests that that view should be inclusive of transitions and throughout the last and first weeks and months.

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