The first million really is the hardest.

Daniele Struppa became dean of George Mason University’s mammoth 30,000-student College of Arts and Sciences in 1997, having advanced from the chairmanship of the math department there. It wasn’t long before he ended up sharing breakfast with a wealthy potential donor who was taking a keen interest in a new humanities initiative Struppa was trying to get off the ground. But this was Struppa’s first rodeo, and he was hesitant about asking for money and unsure of how to rope in the gift. No one had told him how to do it, and it just seemed weird.

“It was he who said ‘I think at this point what you really need is for me to give you a million dollars.’ It was he who actually broke the ice for me,” recalls Struppa, now chancellor of Chapman University. “A million dollars is a lot of money. Imagine if somebody over breakfast would agree to give it to you.”

Over the next seven years, these meetings became more and more the norm for Struppa, and the millions kept coming. Struppa may not have entered the job realizing he’d be a fund-raiser, a politician and a crisis manager, but he says that’s exactly what he became. This is deanship 2.0, and it’s not for the faint of heart. Increasingly complex and big-budget colleges, a crushing economy, and a skeptical public questioning the very purpose of higher education have changed the landscape for a middle management position that now resembles some earlier incarnation of the presidency itself. While the deanship was always a position of leadership in academe, today’s deans say they are administrators in the truest sense, called upon to engage in more long-term strategic thinking within the wider contexts of universities that are often struggling financially. At many institutions, deans are also forced to fend more for themselves by courting donors, bolstering research and creating entrepreneurial partnerships with industry.

“I took the job about three months before the budget collapsed,” says Ana Mari Cauce, dean of the University of Washington’s College of Arts and Sciences. “And one of the big satisfactions you get [as a dean] is building, and that isn’t something we’re doing a lot of now. So you have to kind of reorient yourself to what’s rewarding.”

Cauce’s college has trimmed about $12 million from a $200 million budget in the last two years, and expects to endure a cut of as much as 10 percent once temporary money supplied from the provost’s office runs out. As state funds dwindle, research dollars have come to comprise more than half of the college’s total budget.

“The metaphor I use is that we’re still standing … but we’re on the edge of a cliff,” Cauce wrote in an e-mail.

The college has canceled 36 faculty searches and massively enlarged some classes, including a biology course that grew from 400 students in each section to 700. While Cauce says the college’s learning outcomes evaluations demonstrate academic quality hasn’t suffered from that kind of growth, these are not the sorts of projects deans dream of doing. Still, Cauce says she enjoys running a college that, with 25,000 students, is larger than many universities. Somewhat unexpectedly, Cauce says she derives much of that pleasure from her new – and time-consuming – role as fund-raiser-in-chief. The hours are tough, but the benefits aren’t shabby, either.

“I find it very difficult to complain to a faculty member about having gone out to dinner the night before to one of the best restaurants in Seattle,” she says. “And the kind of people who support the university are people I have tremendous respect for and enjoy getting to know.”
The fact that a dean like Cauce must now be able to work a cocktail party just as effectively as she runs a faculty meeting is coloring the very process by which deans are selected. So you’re the best your discipline has to offer? Great, but can you tell a joke?

William McKinney, vice chancellor for academic affairs at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne, says he’s looking for charm and creativity as much as anything when he hires a dean.

“I’m watching that person when we’re out to dinner with community leaders and industry people,” he says. “I’m watching that person at breakfast. I’m watching that person at receptions. I think personality is huge.”

While there is an argument to be made that these new responsibilities could shift deans away from their more traditional roles as academic leaders consumed with issues like curriculum development, McKinney says he doesn’t see it that way. Indeed, higher education will only thrive at a time of diminishing resources if deans engage alongside presidents in pursuit of new revenue streams and opportunities, he says.

“I actually do see the changing role of the dean as positive because these are the individuals who are in the best positions to lead positive change in higher education due to their proximity to our faculty,” McKinney said in an e-mail. “The changing role of the dean in many ways embodies how higher education is changing, and ... must change.”

It's clear, however, that these evolving roles may mean deans won't devote the same amount of time to direct faculty contact, among other things, says James Gandre, provost at Roosevelt University.

"I think it’s both good and bad,” he says. "What it does is it allows for more contact [with donors] and more possibilities for fund-raising, which can really help an institution or a college and the greater institution move forward in ways it might not [otherwise]. On the other hand, yes it will shift them away a little bit from curriculum development, etc. But I think what’s happening is you see associate deans taking on those kinds of roles ... All in all, I actually don’t think it’s a horrible thing. But are there downsides? Sure."

'Exit, Voice, and Loyalty'

There’s some evidence to suggest the financial pressures placed on deans are creating tensions within their relationships across campus. In a recently released survey of college chief financial officers, a plurality of respondents – about one-third – described their relationships with deans as the most challenging at their institutions. A further statistical breakdown of the survey, provided to Inside Higher Ed by the National Association of College and University Business Officers, suggests the relationship between deans and CFOs actually gets worse over time. While 29.8 percent of CFOs in the job a year or less saw deans as their most challenging colleagues, that figure rose to 34.2 percent for CFOs on the job more than 10 years.

In this economic environment, it would also not be surprising to see strained relations between deans and faculty or deans and presidents and provosts, says Peter Eckel, director of programs and initiatives at the American Council on Education’s (ACE) Center for Effective Leadership. Deans are placed in the sometimes awkward position of cheerleading for their individual colleges, while at the same time serving the best interests of the university entire, he says.

"Sometimes those dual roles are in sync with one another, but particularly in budgetary hard times, those two roles can come in conflict with each other,” Eckel says.

Such a conflict emerged this spring at Georgia State University, where a dean launched a public fight he says was aimed at preserving his college. He wound up losing his job in a spat that crystalizes the tensions between serving one's college and one's president.

In March, University System of Georgia Chancellor Erroll Davis ordered the state's 35 public colleges to quickly create a doomsday plan for slashing another $300 million – on top of the governor’s recommended $265 million cut – from the system’s $2.2 billion budget. With that unsavory task in hand, Georgia State officials discussed a number of bleak scenarios, including the merger of the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies with another college. Bart Hildreth, the college’s dean, said he was “blindsided” when the proposal was floated in a public meeting, and he subsequently fired off a five-page memo to faculty that said the plan would “destroy arguably the most successful quality academic enterprise on campus.”

The backlash against Hildreth was swift. Within days, he resigned at the behest of Mark Becker, a relatively new president who had hired Hildreth just eight months earlier. Reflecting on the episode, Hildreth says he was faced with options laid out starkly in Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, a book by Albert Otto Hirschman, an influential economist widely labeled a “maverick.”
“You have three options: You can exit; you can show your loyalty, salute and move on; or you can voice your view of a situation,” says Hildreth, who remains a professor of public management and policy in the college. “But if you stand up and voice in a professional manner, there’s a risk. So I think the exit, voice and loyalty framework holds for [all] deans. ...”

Georgia State officials point out that the Andrew Young School, now headed by a new dean, remains a stand-alone entity. Hildreth argues the school still exists because the university succumbed to outside pressures from business leaders and Andrew Young, the former congressman and civil rights leader for whom the school is named. But George State officials suggest the merger plan was never seriously considered.

“That proposal never made it into any official documents submitted to the Legislature or the Board of Regents,” said Andrea Jones, a university spokeswoman.

Hildreth says he is without regret.

“I am very, very satisfied with my professional approach throughout this,” he says.

**Pathway to Presidency**

The natural career trajectory for deans moving up the academic ladder is through the provost’s slot and on to a presidency. There are, however, exceptions. ACE has seen an uptick in the number of deans looking to participate in its “Advancing to the Presidency” workshop, and that likely suggests some deans believe their growing portfolios prepare them to move directly into presidencies, says Eckel, who runs the program.

There are already a number of examples of deans moving straight into the president’s post. Among those who’ve made the transition are Richard Levin, president of Yale University, who was previously dean of Yale’s graduate school of arts and sciences; Alan G. Merten, president of George Mason University, who moved directly into the post from the deanship of the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University; and Adam F. Falk, president of Williams College, who previously served as dean of the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences at Johns Hopkins University.

Among respondents to a recent survey by the Council of Independent Colleges, about one-third of provosts said they weren't interested in moving on to the presidential post, and that may create an opening for deans, Eckel says.

“The dean is clearly at the top of that list as another pathway in,” he says.

And just as provosts may not always be itching to be presidents, deans aren’t universally hardwired to become chief academic officers, either. So says a dean at a Research I institution, who, candidly discussing how bleak the budget-slashing job of provost appears in this economy, asked not to be identified.

“If the provost keeled over tomorrow, I’d probably be one of two or three deans the president might put in there to [stop] the hemorrhaging, but I would not do that,” he says. “I would not do that. As much as I love this university and I love the president, I wouldn’t do it. For me to say I wouldn’t do anything for this university is astonishing.”

But these are astonishing times – times that test deans, provosts, and presidents alike. It is in that context that deans need to focus deliberately on why they’re there in the first place, says Bobby Gempesaw, who recently announced he’d step down from his post as dean of the University of Delaware’s Alfred Lerner College of Business and Economics.

“As a dean I only have one primary goal: To ensure the success of my students,” he says. “My decisions are all guided by [whether] this is good for my students. That’s our business. All other goals should be derivative of that.”

In service to that goal, however, deans will be increasingly called upon to prove they’re doing the right thing for students, says Gandre, provost at Roosevelt. Indeed, Gandre argues that the public and Congressional pressures tied to accountability may pose even greater challenges for deans than this great recession has. It will require deans to be “much more demonstrative about the benefits of education,” and Gandre says deans can only do that by thinking about the good of the entire university, and not just their little pieces of it.

“A dean,” he says, “really more and more becomes like a mini-president -- the best ones, I should say.”

— Jack Stripling

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