Leading universities: Building a team

By William G. Bowen

Colleges and universities come in every size and shape and operate in every kind of society imaginable. Generalising about these fascinating (endlessly complicated) institutions is hazardous to one's health, but I have come to believe that there are certain propositions that do apply in many contexts, across countries and institutional types. In this short essay, I will concentrate on lessons that I have learned from many years working to build teams of administrative colleagues and faculties in the United States of America.[1]

Building an effective administrative team

I am skeptical that it was ever possible in modern times for a university vice-chancellor or president to accomplish much on his (or her) own. Certainly it isn't today. There is just too much to do, too many constituencies to keep in mind, and too many personal relationships that have to be handled sensitively. One of the things I am reasonably good at is identifying and recruiting outstanding people, and whatever success I enjoyed in the president's office at Princeton was attributable in large part to the quality of my colleagues and to the highly collegial working relationships that we enjoyed. A sure path to mediocrity, if not failure, is to be afraid of good people. I have always believed in surrounding myself with colleagues who can do all the things that I cannot.

The relationship between the president and the provost (the general deputy to the president in most academic settings) is especially critical.

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1 This essay draws heavily on my recent book, *Lessons learned: Reflections of a University President* (Princeton University Press, 2010). The book also discusses "lessons learned" in dealing with trustees, working to maintain institutional independence and freedom of expression, setting academic priorities, recruiting a diverse student population, raising money and working with alumni, balancing pressures inside a president's office, and deciding when and how to leave.

At Princeton I was fortunate to work with a series of outstanding provosts who went on to lead other institutions. My last provost, Neil Rudenstine, later served as president of Harvard. Neil and I worked together for over twenty years, and I learned so much from this distinguished scholar of English literature who had impeccable judgment and could see around corners that I didn't even know existed. The joke at Princeton was that the university had two provosts and two presidents, since we largely functioned interchangeably. We almost never went to the same meeting, since we got more done by dividing the work. It should also be said that while we had grown up differently, were from different disciplines, brought different perspectives to bear on issues, and had different tendencies (mine, to get it done now — Neil's, to get it done right!), we had exactly the same sense of the university's mission. We never wasted time debating what needed to be accomplished. The value of having shared values and shared commitments cannot be overstated.

I also learned how valuable it was to have a "non-academic provost" — a person who could do whatever needed to be done on the administrative side of the house. The skills my long-time Vice President for Administrative Affairs brought to the table are often undervalued. He was the consummate listener, a kind of ombudsman without the title. He was also willing to take on the unglamorous tasks that had to be done well but that most people preferred to avoid (oversight of security, food services, and so on). He was an all-purpose warrior who had, as he liked to say, "carried his spear" for a long time. In my view, every president needs at least one such experienced spear-carrier whom everyone trusts.

Having outstanding deans, investment officers, and administrative assistants matters tremendously. I also learned — through first-hand experience — that institutions should not undervalue contributions made by the truly unusual person who can work across constituencies. My example is Fred Fox, '39 (who always insisted that no Princeton name was complete without class numerals). Fred's title was "Keeper of Princetoniana", his office was directly across from mine in Nassau Hall, and his presence brightened every day. An irrepressible spirit who somehow managed to make the most surly person smile, Fred was a great ambassador to every constituency. He was once prevailed upon to complete — of all things antithetical to his character — a "position description and analysis form". A colleague observed: "The position and the incumbent defy classification, and that is as it should be". Fred's submission was described as "an awesome illustration of the difference that one dedicated individual can make to the life of an institution". Fred listed 161 separate functions involving students, faculty, alumni, and friends. Included on his list was "Soothed Yale Professor whose bulldog was stolen by our undergraduates. Petted his dog".

In recruiting senior colleagues, one major lesson I learned, in the aftermath of a serious mistake, was not to over-persuade. In one case, I believed that I had found the ideal person to fill an important position, and I courted this individual assiduously. As we were about to conclude what I thought were highly promising negotiations, the individual called me and said that, after much thought, he had concluded that the job just wasn't right for him. I refused to accept this conclusion and unleashed all the persuasive skills that I could muster, explaining why the individual was in fact just right for the job and why he would love it. The candidate accepted the position. Within a year and a half it was evident that his judgment about lack of fit had been correct all along, and that I had been wrong. There was an amicable parting of the ways. The lesson is obvious: individuals being recruited often know more about themselves and what they can and cannot do (and will enjoy doing) than anyone else will ever know, and it is wise to listen carefully to self-assessments. Subsequently, I lived by the adage: "no reluctant dragons". I felt so strongly about this lesson that I even had t-shirts made up with "no reluctant dragons" emblazoned on the back.

Another (closely related) lesson about choosing people that I learned only imperfectly over time is to listen carefully to the testimony of a wide variety of people who have worked closely with a candidate. It is dangerous to decide too quickly that someone is exactly right for a position — and then fail to heed clear warning signals provided by others. Sometimes I just didn't really "hear" comments that I didn't want to hear because they contradicted what I thought I already knew.

It can be especially valuable to take testimony from people who have worked for a candidate in a subordinate role. Some people are good at relating "up" but not so good at relating "down".

I also learned not to focus too much on fixing my last mistake. When seeking to replace someone who had displayed an obvious deficiency, it is tempting to concentrate on finding a successor without that particular deficiency. But that approach can lead to appointing someone who lacks other needed skills. I learned this lesson in domains as different as football (coaches need to be able both to inspire and to call the right plays inside the 20-yard line) and librarians (who need to be able both to take advantage of new technologies and manage staff in an old-fashioned, loving way). There is no escaping the need to look at the whole set of talents required and then to make a determined effort to find someone who has them all. Those of us who grew up as teachers sometimes mistakenly think (as I have done) that we can teach more than we can. One colleague wisely admonished me: "People come in packages; you either buy the package or you don't, but do not believe that you can improve the package very much".

With the best will in the world, it is unrealistic to expect to make the right appointment every time. Inevitably it will turn out that, as an experienced friend once put it, "all of our ducks are not swans". People who are excellent in one setting ("swans" in one pond) may be less effective when asked to do something else (may become "ducks" in another pond). Some absolutely outstanding faculty members are not good at certain kinds of administrative tasks. For example, one of my closest friends at Princeton, a highly regarded academic with an international reputation, was neither happy nor terribly successful during a brief stint as provost. He found relations with the student press particularly vexing, and I will never forget his response to a reporter for the *Daily Princetonian* who was convinced that one mistake had occurred because the provost was managing a vast conspiracy of some kind. Exasperated, he said: "Can't you accept the simple explanation of incompetence?"

When I was asked what lessons I had learned in the course of appointing countless numbers of people, I said: "I have learned two things: to acknowledge my mistakes sooner and to fix problems faster". Once it is evident that someone is just not working out, it rarely, if ever, pays to just hope that things will improve, that the sun will shine tomorrow. A trustee commentator with extensive business experience told me that in the venture capital world in which he lives, there is this saying: "I never fired anyone too soon". A related lesson I learned is that it is sometimes (though certainly not always) easier than one might have supposed to deal with unwelcome personnel problems. The person having difficulties may well recognise that there is a problem and even be relieved when the problem is identified and addressed directly. In such situations, I learned to say: "Let's not waste time debating what went wrong or how we got where we are — no finger-pointing. Rather, let's simply agree that, for whatever reasons, things are just not working and that we need, together, to find a graceful way out".

RECRUITING AND RETAINING FACULTY

Building the faculty is a never-ending task, and a task that is vitally important. Over the long run, the quality of a university depends critically on what one hopes will be the ever-growing capacities of the faculty — the teaching and research abilities of individual faculty members, to be sure, but also their collegiality and commitment to the university at large.

The first lesson I learned about building the faculty is the importance of identifying outstanding individuals to chair departments and then persuading them to serve in these demanding positions. In many colleges and universities, departmental chairs operate in a critical space between full-time administrators and the faculty. They are, in a non-trivial sense, both administrators and faculty members. Their leadership can make a tremendous difference. In my experience, strong chairs of departments are essential in recruiting and retaining the ablest faculty members, and in resisting tendencies to slide back to mediocrity. It is important to avoid the temptation simply to name a truly outstanding scholar, on the often-unconscious assumption that the superb scholar will necessarily be a great judge of candidates for appointment. As one wise person put it in recalling the failure of a truly scholarly chair to arrest the decline of a department, "Alas, the great man had a preference for likeable mediocrities".

In my view, the chair of a department needs to feel that he or she works for the president or vice-chancellor and not just for the members of the department — as essential as it is for the chair to enjoy the strong support of departmental colleagues. For this reason, I always appointed the chairs of departments myself, after having received the best counsel I could obtain from members of the department and key members of the administration. My practice was to write to all the faculty members in the department and ask them to send me a confidential memo explaining the main issues before the department and who they thought would provide the best leadership in addressing these issues. They were also encouraged to be brutally candid in telling me who they thought should *not* be appointed. I found these communications to be enormously helpful in making good appointments — and in avoiding mistakes. The memos were also invaluable guides to broader issues I needed to know about. This was a time-consuming process, but it was well worth the investment.

A question to which there is no easy answer is how long someone should chair a department. Practice varies and probably should vary. It is clearly unwise to have a "permanent" chair, but a strict limitation on years of service also seems unwise since circumstances sometimes dictate a need for considerable continuity. Some flexibility is required. But whatever the expectations concerning length of service, I am convinced that mechanically rotating faculty through the position of departmental chair is at least as ill-advised as having chairs elected by their colleagues. Not everyone, and certainly not every great scholar and teacher, is suited for the job of chair. An ineffective departmental leader can make it hard to accomplish positive things and can all too easily become an impediment to constructive change.

Everyone involved in the process of faculty recruiting needs to maintain a consistently high standard. The dangers of special pleading by departmental faculty on behalf of "friends" (sometimes former graduate students) are all too real, and both department chairs and deans/provosts must be alert to this danger. It is essential to recognise that many departments, and especially specialised sections within departments, are tiny. All of Roman history, for example, may be in the hands of one or two people — and a single bad appointment can have highly detrimental effects. Even larger departments can decline rapidly if even a few mediocre appointments are made. And it can take decades, not just a few years, to recover from such mistakes. This is the reason why a rigorous process of reviewing departmental recommendations is so important.

Departments must of course take the lead in screening potential candidates for appointment, but once top candidates have been identified, the president can sometimes play a valuable role in the recruitment process. My experience in building molecular biology at Princeton illustrates this point. In that situation, the need for a high level commitment of resources meant that the individuals being recruited had to be confident that the president and provost were solidly on board. Even when no special commitment of resources is required, a personal touch can be important. I remember a case in which an engineering department was trying to persuade a much sought after scientist to come to Princeton — and this individual happened to care greatly about his squash game. At that time (no longer, I am sorry to say), I was a good squash player and the chair of the department asked if I would be willing to play with his candidate in the course of a campus visit. I agreed and then asked: "Am I supposed to win or to lose?" The answer was, "win!" Fortunately, I did — and then explained to the prospective faculty member that I had many squash partners who were better players than I was, and that if he came to Princeton he could no doubt improve his game. He came — whether for that reason or not, I will never know.

Departments that are especially strong academically and especially proud of their academic standing sometimes argue that it is only the scholarly/research capacities of a candidate that matter. Academic accomplishment and academic promise are clearly of first importance, but I disagree with the proposition that no other factors should be considered. Princeton's experience in building the life sciences is again relevant. That history demonstrates clearly that leadership and collegiality are highly consequential. A visit to my office by a talented young assistant professor who had decided to leave the university made a lasting impression on me. He said that his working environment was so unpleasant, and personal relationships were so strained, that he just couldn't continue. "Good science", he said, "is not enough". Of course, universities need to welcome — and urge on — the opinionated scholar of outstanding ability who is never going to win a collegiality award.[2] I worked, more or less cheerfully, with many people of this kind. But everyone cannot be like this. There has to be a core of people who will look out for each other and for the institution writ large.

In particular, it is essential that there be faculty members with the capacity to lead their departments, and such capacities are certainly not defined solely by having impeccable scholarly credentials.[3] The unending need to find faculty who can provide leadership, and who can be good administrators as well as fine teachers and scholars, results in part from the fact that very bright people interested in academic careers are often uninterested in such roles — and unsuited for them. This systemic pattern explains why it is critically important to seize any opportunities that present themselves to recruit talented people who can "do it all".

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[2] One faculty friend of mine had such upsetting conversations with another faculty member that he had a card printed up that read: "On the advice of my doctor, I can discuss this subject with you no longer". He presented this card when his annoying colleague tried to extend a conversation.

[3] At one point I was looking for a new chair of a troubled department and was having no success identifying a suitable candidate. Finally, I was driven to offer the position to someone who lacked many of the qualities that a chair ought to have. I was desperate. The person in question recognised his own limitations and said to be me, in the most engaging way: "Well, I will agree to do it, but both of us have to recognise that putting me in this position will be the ultimate test of 'role theory'" (the notion that people adjust their behavior to the roles that they are asked to perform). The sad conclusion to this story is that, in spite of best intentions, the individual did a truly terrible job as chair — role theory failed us.

There is another side to this coin. There are people (fortunately not many) who are so dysfunctional in any group context that smaller colleges and universities, in particular, need to be careful in appointing them. Needless to say, I am *not* talking about applying any kind of social/political litmus test; nor am I arguing against the inclusion of intellectually provocative colleagues. Rather I am talking about being aware that some individuals, because of who they are and how they relate to others, create what economists call "negative externalities" — they make everyone around them worse, rather than better. It is especially difficult for small places to try and cope with carriers of this negative externality gene. Larger universities generally find it easier to live with truly erratic and sometimes destructive behavior, but extreme cases can prove problematic even in the most sophisticated and "forgiving" contexts.

One bad appointment that I initiated was an individual who, while very bright, was so annoying to almost everyone that he succeeded in doing what no one else had been able to do: unite a disparate group of people, who now had a common enemy! This problem resolved itself because the faculty member in question kept making outrageous demands on his colleagues as well as on the university — demands which had to be, and were, rejected. In time, these "rejections" led the troublesome individual to accept an appointment elsewhere, an outcome that led to a rousing cheer from those left behind. In retrospect, I never should have recommended the appointment of this person in the first place; there were plenty of warning signs.

Dealing with the odd case can be time-consuming and draining, but it is a less fundamental challenge to building a strong faculty than putting in place a salary structure and a process for adjusting salaries that serve the institution well. Setting salaries is extremely important because of the obvious role compensation plays in driving decisions individuals make as to where they will work. Compensation policies and practices also have strong "signaling" effects. Too much salary differentiation within the faculty (which inevitably becomes known, even if the salaries of individuals are treated as confidential) can lead to jealousies and feelings of unfair treatment that interfere with potentially valuable collegial relations. Still, there are markets out there, and it is foolish in the extreme to believe that one can ignore such realities. Economists and engineers, doctors, lawyers, and professors of business, are going to command higher salaries than faculty in most humanities fields. Refusal to recognise such differences (as British universities tried to do at one point) leads to problems of many kinds, including difficulties in attracting top people in the most competitive fields and pressures to substitute early promotions for salary adjustments.[4]

Within disciplines, too, it is necessary to recognise differences in achievement and in contributions. Incentives matter, and it is important to be able to recognise and reward truly outstanding performance. For these reasons, I have always been a strong believer in a "merit "system of compensation — albeit within a salary structure that is generally understood and accepted. Needless to say, the effectiveness and credibility of a merit system depend heavily on having very good information about the performance of individual faculty members — as teachers, scholars, and contributors to the institution. Also important, I believe, is the direct involvement of faculty, both as chairs of departments recommending salary adjustments and as members of the central review committee.

The ability to make clear distinctions among faculty in setting salaries can also be a valuable tool in correcting the occasional mistake made in having given tenure to a person who has not lived up to earlier promise. I have seen a number of situations in which communicating clearly to a faculty member that he/she should not expect more than minimal salary adjustments going forward led to decisions to relocate. It was sometimes possible to say simply (and respectfully) that what the person did, and liked to do, might be valued more highly at another institution. It is fairer to let someone know where he or she stands than to have ambiguity and vagueness color relationships. There is much to be said for directness and candor.

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[4] William G. Bowen, "University salaries: Faculty differentials", *Economica*, new series, 30, 120 (1963): 341-359.

Let me next recount an experience I had with a faculty member who had just won a Nobel Prize in physics. This well-deserved recognition came at a time when another leading university was spending lots of money recruiting top faculty, and my physicist (whom I think I can safely identify by name — Val Fitch) was told that the university seeking to recruit him would double his salary. Professor Fitch came to see me and was kind enough to begin the conversation by saying: "Don't worry, I'm not going". (We were personal friends and that may well have encouraged him to reduce my anxiety level). But that was not the end of the conversation. Val went on to say that his research group did have real needs, and that he hoped Princeton would address them. He said (and I remember his exact words): "Excellence can't be bought, but it has to be paid for". In short, he was not going to be bribed to leave, but we had to meet his legitimate needs. I responded by saying, "Val, that's just right". "We will do our best to help you and your colleagues continue to be leaders in your field, but if the time comes when we can't do that, you should leave". Professor Fitch continued to be a valuable member of the Princeton faculty until his retirement. Being willing and able to "pay for excellence" is a good way of stating the obligation of a university to someone of Fitch's caliber.

Important as it is to have in place an effective process for generating good recommendations regarding faculty appointments, it is equally important to have a strong process for reviewing tenure recommendations. Two principles are worth highlighting:

- First, recommendations for new appointments or promotions to tenure have to be judged in the context of departmental/university needs, not just in terms of the "absolute" merits of the candidate. If a department already has a relatively young tenured member in 20th century Chinese history, for example, it may not make sense to award tenure to someone else of roughly the same age who has the same interests. Complaints about unfairness ("look at how good the candidate is") cannot override the need to allocate resources responsibly.

- An even more important principle is the desirability of resolving doubts or uncertainties against the candidate, hard-hearted as this may seem. A wise Dean used to say, "doubts increase". By this he meant that if there is any uncertainty about a candidate's quality or prospects, the odds are high that such "doubts" will grow over time. That is a lesson I learned over and over again: "doubts increase". Difficult as it is to deny a promotion to someone whom colleagues like and think will get better over time, it is wiser, as a general rule, to just say "no" if there are reservations. A related proposition is that if a department already contains several mediocre faculty members, it is almost always a mistake to add someone else who is not really excellent — even if the individual is better than most current members of the department.[5]

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[5] I remember one extreme case in which the Committee turned down a recommendation from a not-very-strong department even though the department insisted that the candidate was better than anyone now in it. "Perhaps", was the response, "but not good enough".