Liminality in academic middle management
Negotiating the associate dean role in US higher education administration

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the complex academic-administrative role of the associate dean in US higher education administration. Previous research in Australia, UK and USA indicates that these academic middle managers experience significant conflict and ambiguity due to their roles and responsibilities as faculty members and administrators. Victor Turner’s concept of liminality provides insight into the challenges of academic middle management at this administrative level. Analysing qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with associate deans at US research-intensive universities, I find that associate deans experience changes in perspective and relationships that foreground contradictions of meaning and highlight their paradoxical social status. I argue that, as part of a process of transition from faculty to administrator, the associate deanship is essential to the social construction of the university.

KEYWORDS
academic administration, academic leadership, associate deanship, liminality, middle management, role ambiguity, role conflict, transition

With the neoliberalisation of the university (Canaan and Shumar 2008), senior leaders of higher education institutions in the United States are shifting their attention outwardly to address escalating demands from external constituencies (e.g., federal government, state legislatures, accrediting agencies, etc.) for improved performance, increased access and affordability, and greater accountability (Ginsberg 2011). Concomitantly, the number of middle management positions (academic and non-academic) has risen to support meeting these external demands and to take up many of the internal
managerial functions traditionally handled by upper administration (Ginsberg 2011; Rhoads and Sporn 2002). Among the increasing number of middle managers, associate deans, in particular, play a pivotal role in academic administration (Preston and Floyd 2016). As faculty members, they understand the challenges and rewards of teaching and scholarly pursuits. As administrators, they are well versed in university policies and procedures. Using both sets of knowledge and skills, these faculty-administrators perform administrative functions on behalf of the college dean, while supporting the goals of the faculty, students and academic departments within the college. Their middle management role thus provides ‘a link between the academic voice and the ever-changing demands being placed upon universities’ (Preston and Floyd 2016: 266).

However, the academic–administrative link that associate deans provide complicates their responsibilities and blurs their roles as both faculty member and administrator. Issues such as poorly defined duties, distrust and distancing from faculty colleagues, decreased research productivity, little to no power or authority, and competing faculty and administrator responsibilities are among the persistent challenges that associate deans face, regardless of time or place (Applegate and Book 1989; Floyd and Preston 2019; George 1981; George and Coudret 1986; Jackson and Gmelch 2003; Mason and de la Harpe 2020; Pepper and Giles 2015; Preston and Floyd 2016; Rogers 1989; Stone and Coussons-Reed 2011; White 2014; Zodikoff and Pardasani 2020). Given associate deans’ centrality in academic administration, researchers and associate deans alike have emphasised the need for universities to better understand the ‘dynamics and dilemmas’ (George and Coudret 1986) of the associate deanship in order to provide adequate and appropriate training and support for those serving in the position (Jackson and Gmelch 2003; Pepper and Giles 2015; Preston and Floyd 2016; Preston and Price 2012; Sayler et al. 2017; Zodikoff and Pardasani 2020). Despite repeated calls for more in-depth research, our understanding of the associate dean role remains limited to the identification of consistent, but disconnected, themes. An anthropological perspective, which provides culturally relevant ethnographic detail, is needed to form a more holistic picture of what it means to be an associate dean. As an anthropologist and former associate dean, I argue that Victor Turner’s concept of ‘liminality’ can provide useful insight into this middle management role. The greater goal of this effort is to help build capacity among stakeholders for navigating emergent administrative terrains in higher education.
Analysing qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with academic associate deans at US research-intensive universities, I find that the associate deanship is an indeterminate phase and place between the fixed social statuses of faculty and administrator that constitute the university. Because this liminal position is not a socially recognised category distinct from faculty or administrator, associate deans must make sense of their ambiguous status and the changes in perspective and relationships that this repositioning brings. In so doing, associate deans negotiate contested ideas about, and central to, academic culture and social life in university settings. In this way, the associate deanship is a step in a process of social transition from faculty to administrator that is essential to the production and reproduction of the university.

Previous research

Tremendous variability characterises the associate dean position not only between institutions, but also between colleges within a single institution and between associate dean positions within a single college. Associate deans may be responsible for any combination of functional areas, such as undergraduate education, graduate education, faculty/personnel, research and academic affairs (Applegate and Book 1989; Jackson and Gmelch 2003; Sayler et al. 2017). Alternatively, subject matter may guide the division of labour in the college, in which case associate deans may perform a suite of functions for a subset of academic departments in the college (Jackson and Gmelch 2003). Reporting lines may have associate deans in a staff position relative to the dean in which case associate deans support and advise the dean without decision-making authority relative to the academic departments within the college (Applegate and Book 1989; Ayers and Doak 1986). More often, though, associate deans are in line management positions between the dean and academic departments in which case they carry managerial responsibility for college activities, which they perform on behalf of the dean (Ayers and Doak 1986; George 1981; Jackson and Gmelch 2003). However, in these cases associate deans typically lack personnel and/or budgetary authority relative to the academic departments and faculty within the college (George 1981; Stone and Coussons-Read 2011), although some (usually associate deans for research) may control a small budget of their own (e.g., to fund faculty and/or graduate research). Finally, associate deans may be appointed part-time or full-time and for a limited or un-
defined term (Applegate and Book 1989), although the position is generally not considered a permanent post. As a result, associate deans may continue to teach and/or conduct research in accord with their appointments or with an eye to a future return to the faculty (White 2014).

Previous research on the associate deanship has used the constructs of role conflict and role ambiguity (Kahn et al. 1964; Rizzo et al. 1970) to explain the challenges of the associate deanship (e.g., Floyd and Preston 2018; George 1981; George and Coudret 1986; Jackson and Gmelch 2003). Role conflict and ambiguity, defined as ‘incongruence’ between, and lack of clarity about, expectations for behaviour, arise in organisations due to inadequate resources to fulfil role responsibilities, inconsistent organisational policies and work demands, and incompatibility of responsibilities associated with multiple roles, among other aspects (Rizzo et al. 1970). While role conflict and ambiguity shed light on organisational and structural issues within institutions of higher education, these constructs do not aid in understanding how associate deans experience and manage such challenges. Where the human experience of the associate deanship has been explored, qualitative studies have revealed both a ‘dual-ness’ (Preston and Floyd 2016: 276; also White 2014), that is, a sense of being a faculty member and an administrator, as well as an ‘in-betweenness’ (Zodikoff and Pardasani 2020: 307), that is, a sense of being ‘in the middle’ (Preston and Price 2012: 412; also Pepper and Giles 2015) and hence neither faculty nor administrator (Koerner and Mindes 1997). Liminality is therefore a useful theoretical lens for the current study because it offers an interpretive framework through which to explore associate deans’ experiences of dual-ness and in-betweenness, while incorporating structural inconsistencies also noted in the literature.

**Theoretical framework**

Liminality, as elaborated by Turner (1967, 1969, 1974, 1977), is part of a process of social transition effected through rites of passage. Specifically, as ‘neophytes’ (Turner 1969) transition from one social status to another, they shed the duties and responsibilities associated with the former status but do not yet assume those of the new status. In this way, they undergo ‘a sort of social limbo’ (Turner 1974: 57) in which they are ‘neither one thing nor another; or may be both’ (Turner 1967: 97). In this liminal state of ‘structural invisibility’ (Turner 1967: 99), neophytes endure ‘ordeals and humiliations’
(Turner 1969: 103), which serve to destroy the old status, while they are instructed in the knowledge necessary for the coming status. As Turner (1977: 37–38) explains, ‘[R]educing down overlaps with reconstruction. The rebuilding process is by instruction, partly in practical skills, partly in tribal esoterica, and proceeds both by verbal and nonverbal symbolic means’. Free from the constraints of custom and convention, neophytes experiment with this new knowledge, playing with the norms, behaviours and expectations of the new status. ‘In liminality, new ways of acting, new combinations of symbols, are tried out, to be discarded or accepted’ (Turner 1977: 40). Liminality is therefore an experience of paradox and contradiction, of conflict and ambiguity, as neophytes are treated and act as ‘a confusion of all the customary categories’ (Turner 1967: 97).

While the concept of liminality was developed to explain ritual processes in small-scale societies, it has been applied in a variety of contemporary contexts, such as management consulting (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003), temporary employment (Garsten 1999), and the first-year college experience (Palmer et al. 2009), among other higher education settings (e.g., Bettis et al. 2005; Bosetti et al. 2008; Cook-Sather 2006; Cook-Sather and Alter 2011; Deegan and Hill 1991; Rutherford and Pickup 2015). In these applications, liminality provides a framework through which to make sense of individual experiences of identity formation and transformation, learning and development, and relationships and belonging during transitional social phases.

Liminality is not only an individual experience but also a mechanism in the production and reproduction of the social order, as the passage from one status to another ensures that social categories endure (Ortner 1984). With this understanding, the oft-neglected multidimensional aspect of liminality gains importance (Cook-Sather 2006: 110). Neophytes are not just ‘betwixt and between’ but ‘“betwixt and between” all the recognized fixed points of the space-time of structural classification’ (Turner 1967: 97; emphasis added). Recognising the temporal and spatial, as well as experiential, dimensions of liminality allows us to question more readily the taken-for-granted social order of things and explore why transitions are paradoxical to begin with (e.g., Cook-Sather 2006; Cook-Sather and Alter 2011; Garsten 1999).

Methods and participants

Two research questions guided this investigation: (1) in what ways can the associate deanship be understood as a liminal position, that is, how is
liminality created temporally and spatially within a university context; and (2) what are the implications of this liminal positioning for how associate deans experience, interpret and navigate their role? Addressing these questions requires acknowledging that the institutional structures that create conflict and ambiguity for associate deans (per role theory) are socially constructed, and thus directs attention to the meaning of those structures, particularly as perceived by associate deans. Using qualitative data that I collected through semi-structured interviews conducted following institutional review board approval, I investigated patterns of perceptions and behaviours among twenty-two academic associate deans at twelve public institutional members of the Association of American Universities across ten US states. I analysed the interview data through an inductive, recursive process, identifying temporal, spatial and experiential dimensions of conflict and ambiguity and interpreted the themes that emerged through the lens of liminality.

Participants, all of whom gave informed consent to participate and to be audio- or video-recorded, were tenured faculty members (86 per cent full professors, 14 per cent associate professors) with administrative appointments (45 per cent full-time, 45 per cent half-time, 10 per cent other) in colleges of arts and sciences (or derivations thereof). Their responsibilities included undergraduate education, graduate education, faculty/personnel, research and/or academic affairs. Full-time associate deans were more likely to be responsible for a combination of functional areas (with research and graduate education being the most common), while part-time associate deans were more likely to hold responsibility for a single functional area. Three associate deans, two full-time and one part-time, performed a suite of functions for a subset of academic departments within their college. Full-time associate deans maintained a physical office in the dean’s area, while part-time associate deans may (or may not) have a physical office separate from their faculty office, which they used to the extent that they deemed appropriate.

The significant structural variability among associate dean positions noted in the literature was borne out in this sample and was also evidenced in participants’ reports that the configurations of other associate dean positions at their home institutions differed. I was able to confirm this variability in the few instances where two or three participants were employed at the same institutions (e.g., not all associate deans for research at the same institution controlled a budget). The parameters of the position seem
to be at the discretion of the dean and, in some cases, the associate deans themselves, as some reported being responsible for defining their duties and that the scope of their responsibilities had changed over time. Studies conducted on the associate deanship in the UK (e.g., Floyd and Preston 2019; Preston and Floyd 2016; Preston and Price 2012), Australia (e.g., Mason and de la Harpe 2020; Pepper and Giles 2015) and elsewhere in the USA (e.g., White 2014; Zodikoff and Pardasani 2020) suggest that the results of this project are applicable to research universities in other contexts.

**Associate deanship as liminal phase and place: 'As high as you can go while you’re still really a professor'**

The associate deanship is a liminal phase and place in the space-time of the university. As a liminal phase, the associate deanship is a period between faculty and administrator career trajectories. Trajectories, in life course theory (Elder 1985), are ‘interlocked and interdependent events in different areas of life, whereas transitions are seen as stages or radical shifts which interrupt regular patterns of behaviour, and which extend and are carried forward through time’ (Palmer et al. 2009: 41). The associate dean position temporarily interrupts the faculty trajectory, as associate deans perform management functions for the college, which constitutes ‘a radical shift’ from the ‘normal’ faculty patterns of teaching, research, and service.

An associate dean (AD17) with a 75 per cent administrative appointment reflected, ‘It’s kind of nice to sort of take off from your department for a couple of years, focus on a few other things, and take a break from that, you know?’

As a liminal place, the associate deanship is a threshold between social spaces. As Brian Foster (2006: 49) notes, ‘One might say that a university consists of two closely articulated organizations. One is the academic organization that conducts teaching, research, and service…. The second is an administrative organisation that deals with physical, financial, and human resources’. In ‘stepping into’ the position, associate deans ‘leave’ their ‘home’ department on the academic side to enter the dean’s office on the administrative side, constituting a mental and organisational, but not always physical, move. A full-time associate dean (AD18) explained, ‘Our dean told us both that one of the adjustments in this job is that you have to stop thinking of yourself as being from one department and you have to think of yourself now as being in the dean’s office where all the
departments have to be treated equally’. A half-time associate dean (AD7) expressed a similar point: ‘It was made clear in various ways that I needed not to be so enmeshed in my own or other departments’ business but act more on the level of the plane of a dean’.

However, the associate deanship is not yet the start of an administrator trajectory. Rather, it is a period of exploration, during which associate deans contemplate their future and ultimately decide their trajectory. An associate dean previously quoted (AD17) also explained, ‘I didn’t imagine myself being an administrator, but on the other hand, I knew it was a path, right? And I figured that I wouldn’t mind trying it out to see whether I’d be any good at it and whether it could be a potential career path for me’. Thus, while the position organisationally locates associate deans in the dean’s office, the temporary and/or part-time aspects of their administrative appointments ensure that associate deans do not fully ‘cross over’. Indeed, those with half-time appointments have ‘one foot in, one foot out’, as they continue to engage in faculty activities. Indeed, in these cases, it is as if associate deans are split in half. A half-time associate dean (AD20) explained that, when he told his department chair about his new administrative appointment, ‘They said, well, it’s going to be hard to lose you, half of you here, but it will also be good to have someone in the dean’s office to know what’s going on in the campus and college perspectives and so on’. The temporary and/or part-time nature of the position also keeps full-time associate deans tethered to the academic side, because, as one full-time associate dean (AD11) suggested, ‘It’s professional suicide to completely disconnect yourself from all of the work of your home department’.

Their ambiguous organisational position is amplified by the hierarchical structures of the university, which situate the administrative side above the academic side, as information, resources, policies and procedures flow from ‘top down’ or ‘bottom up’. A half-time associate dean (AD12) explained, ‘When I stepped up as associate dean, [my teaching load] went down to one-one mode’. Another full-time associate dean (AD16) commented, ‘If I didn’t like the dean I was working for, I think I would step down’. However, the distribution of power and authority within the institutional hierarchy places control in the dean’s hands. Thus, while the administrative side is hierarchically located above the academic side, associate deans are in between, ranking above the academic side but without the power or authority of the administrative side. As one associate dean (AD17) put it, ‘You really are sandwiched in all these layers’.
In assuming the associate dean position, these faculty-administrators enter an ‘interstructural situation’ (Turner 1967: 93) at the intersection of temporal, organisational and hierarchical dimensions of the university (Figure 1). They pause their faculty career trajectory in order to engage in activities and with others located ‘on the other side’. Yet they have not quite begun an administrator career trajectory, which would have them officially end their faculty activities and fully locate them on the administrative side. In entering the dean’s office, they take a step over and up, while their faculty appointments and activities keep them tied down to the academic side. As a half-time associate dean (AD6) explained, ‘The beauty of this job is that it’s really the highest level of administrator in a university where you haven’t totally gone to the other side. Like, it’s as high as you can go while you’re still really a professor’.

Suspended in liminal time and place, associate deans experience changes in perspective and relationships that reflect their temporal, organisational and hierarchical repositioning while highlighting their paradoxical social status. As they (re)situate themselves in the space-time of the university, they negotiate contradictions of meaning between faculty and administrators, thereby negotiating salient professional identities within particular contexts.

Figure 1. Associate Deanship as an ‘Interstructural Situation’
Liminality changes perspective: ‘Adjusting your lens to where you sit’

The liminality in which associate deans are repositioned affords a different vantage point from which to observe the university. As a full-time associate dean (AD22) explained, ‘I think more institutionally... like what is in the interest of the institution, not necessarily the entire university because I’m not situated at that level, but you adjust your lens to where you sit’. Associate deans speak specifically of having developed ‘a broader perspective’, which can be understood in two ways: (1) ‘a bird’s eye view’ of ‘how things work’, that is, knowing how the university functions, and (2) ‘an institutional view’ that extends beyond their academic department and considers the needs, priorities and goals of the college and university. From their new vantage point, associate deans develop a vision of the university as a system. One half-time associate dean (AD6) explained, ‘You have to acknowledge that you’re operating within a system and that you’re sort of a cog within the system’.

All unequivocally state that their broader perspective is not one shared by faculty, including their ‘previous self’, as one remarked. According to associate deans, faculty differ in their knowledge of the system: ‘I think you just have a different perspective on things because you understand better the way things work, that there are proper channels for doing things, that things don’t get done magically.... I think some of my colleagues who haven’t gotten administrative experience have a hard time understanding that’ (AD18). Faculty are also not positioned to consider the whole system: ‘As a faculty member you kind of think like, what do I or my department need, or what can I get, and not, like, what are sort of the larger institutional problems or obstacles or possibilities’ (AD9).

As a system, the university functions to distribute resources, such as funding, assistantships, grants, academic positions, space, information and people. For the system to function properly, that is, for resources to flow where, how and when intended, processes are in place to organise the distribution of resources. Associate deans play an essential role in this respect, managing processes that form part of the system (e.g., faculty hiring, tenure and promotion), guiding and advising people through processes of the system (e.g., department chairs through programme review), and developing and organising programmes to move people through the system (e.g., professional development workshops for faculty and students).
As a half-time associate dean (AD10) explained, ‘One of the things – that the associate deans who are effective [do] – is being able to navigate the system and get things done’.

Ensuring the system functions, which is fundamentally the associate dean’s administrative role, fosters an institutional view that brings about a reorientation to familiar aspects of the university. For example, as a system, the university consists of interconnected parts, whereby change in one area may lead to change in another. Associate deans must therefore have extensive and deep knowledge of institutional policies and procedures in order to guide workflow appropriately. ‘Rules’ take on new meaning, as associate deans follow rules, ensure that rules are followed by others, and resolve problems associated with rules. A full-time associate dean (AD3) explained how, when transitioning into the role, she ‘learn[ed] that rules are important and have a function and that they are our friends’.

Hierarchy is similarly important for maintaining order in the system. Some associate deans in this study expressed a dislike for a hierarchical approach to managing their direct reports. Others noted its importance in guiding interpersonal relations within the system. A full-time associate dean (AD1) explained, ‘You got to tend to recognise when there are kinds of chains of command almost. And things don’t work well when everybody kind of goes around, so you’ve got to be respectful of that hierarchy’. Regardless of attitude, hierarchy pervades their thinking, as their statements were replete with vertical references, such as ‘higher ups’, ‘administrators up and down the ladder’, ‘kick it up’, ‘things that come down from on high’, and ‘broad direction set from above’. As one associate dean explained, ‘It’s just an awareness of how the next level up thinks’.

Finally, an institutional view means that decisions regarding the allocation of resources must be made carefully and with an eye to the whole system. At the college level, the power to make resource decisions lies with the dean. However, associate deans are positioned to assist in decision-making processes and typically are responsible for executing those decisions (yet another process they manage): ‘I can’t actually make decisions about hiring and I don’t make really very many decisions at all about budgetary matters. I can strategise with the dean about budgetary matters relevant to graduate education or to those departments, but I don’t really make the decisions’ (AD13). In assisting the dean, associate deans learn how decisions are made, including the rules regarding decision-making, thereby enabling them to explain decisions to others, which ultimately resolves
issues in the system. A half-time associate dean (AD6) offered, ‘I had this sort of emergency meeting because one of the departments that I supervise the faculty in is upset about one of these decisions, and they’re reading our letter incorrectly, and I had to talk to the staff people to tell them, “No, don’t read it that way. This is what we meant”’. Decisions therefore become a difficult but necessary aspect of administration: ‘We have some hard decisions to make. You can’t always make everyone happy. You kind of have to know that. And, making people unhappy is the worst part of the job, and there’s no way around it’ (AD21).

At the level of the associate dean, administration is the management of processes, programmes, people and problems. To be effective in this role, associate deans must learn how the university functions and apply an institutional view to conducting their work. Envisioning the university as a system situates associate deans within a college and institutional context and gives meaning to their role outside their academic department. The perspective they gain brings about a reorientation to the university that distinguishes them from faculty. As one associate dean (AD18) stated, ‘It’s a transformation. It’s gradual’.

**Liminality changes academic relationships: 'Dealing with the dark side'**

Repositioning in liminal time and space also brings with it changes in associate deans’ relationships with their academic colleagues. Their changed perspective, in particular, makes them suspect to faculty: ‘In a very anthropological sense, you are no longer part of the collective. You have this sort of deviant perspective where you’re always sort of a bit questioned because you developed this other perspective’ (AD7). Indeed, as Turner (1967: 97) writes, ‘[L]iminal personae nearly always and everywhere are regarded as polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, ‘inoculated’ against them, through having been themselves initiated into the same state’. In higher education, the negative aspects of these changed relationships are epitomised in the expression, ‘the dark side’. ‘The dark side,’ a pejorative applied to the administrative side of the university, is used increasingly in jest by faculty and administrators alike, leading one associate dean to wonder ‘whether that’s becoming almost more kind of meta or self-referential now’. However, the idea has real consequences for associate deans. In learning how to ‘deal with the dark side’, they negotiate the meaning of administration.
As explained by associate deans in this study, the expression ‘the dark side’ carries a double meaning. First, it signifies that a faculty member has ‘left the true path’, abandoning their faculty colleagues and forsaking their research, their discipline, their teaching and their students. As one full-time associate dean (AD4) explained, ‘Coming to the dean’s office is you’re giving up some of what you imagined for yourself and imagined as the job of being a faculty member – being in the classroom and working with students and spending time living a life of the mind, making great ideas, and sharing knowledge’. Second, the dark side signifies that a faculty member has given themselves over to those in control and cares only about money, power and bureaucracy. Someone who has ‘gone to the dark side’ has joined the ‘enemy’, engaging in ‘nefarious’ activities against the faculty and the academic mission of the university. A half-time associate dean (AD9) explained, ‘It means you’re going to enforce the bureaucratic rules and look after the administration and the university as a whole and not care about faculty interests… it’s an us versus them’. Above all, the dark side signals that associate deans no longer belong: ‘What it means is that you are no longer of the faculty, and you are an adversary of the faculty. That’s how I interpret the dark side. You’re not faculty, you’re an adversary’ (AD21).

The idea of the dark side, which is predicated on the separation between academic and administrative halves of the university, shapes relationships between faculty and associate deans, regardless of their full-time or part-time status. Associate deans are responsible for keeping the system functioning and so often must explain bureaucratic aspects of the university (e.g., processes, rules, decisions). They also have access to information and people that faculty do not have, creating a subtle power differential. As a result, associate deans may experience unexpected, unpredictable and sometimes contradictory interactions with faculty, ranging from deference to outright contempt. As an extreme example, a full-time associate dean (AD8) recalled his initial interim appointment: ‘To many of my departmental colleagues, I couldn’t have committed a greater sin than to have taken a job in the dean’s office. And they made no secret of this. I walked into the department’s main office about a month after I’d become an interim associate dean and one of my senior colleagues, when I walked in, sniffed the air and said, “I thought I smelled the stink of the dean’s office”’. While this associate dean laughed off his encounter, others find their colleagues’ behaviour disconcerting and perplexing. A half-time associate dean (AD7) reflected: ‘I noticed it mostly when I was in faculty meetings in the depart-
ment, and they’d be discussing one thing or another, sometimes important issues, and I would chime in with my perspective, which was, I take it from reactions to, something more of the administration’s point of view than the department member’s point of view. And you know, rolling eyes, and that was kind of disturbing to me, unnerving’.

Associate deans, full-time and part-time, actively contest both meanings of the dark side. Many point to the research and teaching activities in which they are still engaged, describing active grants, graduate students or course loads, for example. A small number continue to attend departmental meetings, and half-time associate deans may even have voting privileges as a faculty member. Others draw parallels between their administrative and academic work to explain why the dark side does not apply: ‘I do a ton of mentoring and teaching in this job, it’s just mostly now I do it with faculty, sometimes department chairs’ (AD4). In their interactions with faculty, they develop ways to deflect, dissuade or diminish negative perceptions and reactions. The same associate dean (AD4) explained that ‘a lot of what I do is sort of undo those assumptions and go, “No, I want to hear what you have to tell me”. And so, I’ve had to develop ways to talk about that. So, in a way, I’m undoing what they think a dean should do rather than growing into it’.

In a more nuanced fashion, associate deans also differentiate between ‘making decisions’ and ‘making changes’ to indicate that they do not have the kind of power implied by the dark side. Decisions impact the allocation of resources and the structures within which those resources move, what Wolf (1990) referred to as structural power. Senior administrators exercise structural power when they decide to change regulations, decide to take a faculty line, or decide on a promotion case. Changes, on the other hand, impact the organisation of work or the environments in which people work, what Wolf (1990) referred to as organisational power. Associate deans exercise organisational power when changing a process, changing the culture, or changing the direction of a conversation. Changes, from the associate dean’s perspective, are not nefarious but rather improve working conditions and streamline processes. A full-time associate dean (AD1) explained, ‘I have a tendency to not want to accept that things should be done one way because they have been done the way they have been done. That does not mean that I want to do change for change’s sake, but I do want to make things better’. In this way, they work for the benefit of faculty; they are not part of the dark side.
Faculty encounters make clear that associate deans’ perspective and intentions are suspect. Associate deans attempt to allay these fears and suspicions as they make sense of their changed academic relationships. In considering the ways in which the dark side does not apply to them, they reimagine their administrative work as faculty work and as a way to help through the changes they make. In contesting the dark side, they assert, overtly or not, their faculty status and belonging to the academic side.

**Liminality changes administrative relationships: 'Serving at the pleasure of the dean'**

As direct reports, associate deans carry the responsibility to represent the dean and the obligation to perform work as requested, which, if not fulfilled, can result in the loss of the position. In short, associate deans ‘serve at the pleasure of the dean’, not unlike Turner’s (1969: 95) neophytes: ‘Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life’. Indeed, with serving the dean also comes opportunities to contribute to the dean’s decision-making, a ‘behind-the-scenes’ form of power that not all associate deans acknowledge. Their voluntary participation in the power structures of the university can therefore lead to an internal tension between their faculty and administrative identities. Conceptualising their administrative work as ‘service’ resolves the tension created by their choice to serve.

To ‘serve at the pleasure of the dean’ is to be subject to the dean’s will in terms of administrative appointment regardless of full-time or part-time status. In serving, associate deans perform tasks assigned to them by the dean: ‘Whatever my dean wants me to handle, like, anytime he gets questions about grants, federal research opportunities, nominating people for crap, I get stuck with a lot of that. Anything that’s research, he’ll just push on me’ (AD17). They typically perform those assigned tasks, whether or not they align with their personal beliefs and opinions: ‘[The dean] came to a decision that, if I were in her position, I’d come to a different decision. But I recognise where she is, and my job is to then execute now what her decision is’ (AD15). In the process, they lose a degree of control over their calendar and have limited ability to pursue their own interests: ‘Really in the end
everything comes down to the dean. I can have good ideas or whatever, and I can try to implement them, and, if the dean doesn’t back them, they don’t go anywhere’ (AD13).

In serving the dean, associate deans are also in a position to influence resource allocations, policymaking and other decision-making processes that impact academic departments, faculty and students. A full-time associate dean (AD19) acknowledged the influence she has on the dean’s decision-making as part of departmental budget reallocations she manages: ‘At the end of the day, though, the dean is the final decider. But usually he looks to me to make the recommendations about my division’. Others confirm the ‘soft power’, ‘behind-the-scenes influence’, or ‘framing effect’ their position carries.

Participating in institutional hierarchical structures and university power dynamics in these ways complicates the faculty status of associate deans: ‘Being a professor is, we, you teach your classes, you attend faculty meetings, but otherwise you pretty much work on your own. You’re your own boss. I mean now, I have a boss. I work for her. When she wants something, I have to get it right away’ (AD18). In ‘having a boss,’ associate deans relinquish a degree of autonomy characteristic of, and valued by, faculty. They also assume a degree and kind of power that is often new and difficult to adjust to: ‘I had a rather uncomfortable interaction recently where I shut down [silenced] one of the faculty members in my department’ (AD2).

Conceptualising their administrative work as ‘service’ reconciles this tension and justifies their choice to serve. As one of the three primary categories of faculty work, service constitutes activities that are performed in support of a faculty member’s campus, discipline, profession or community and make use of faculty expertise, knowledge or perspective (Ward 2003). Campus service is an important aspect of shared governance, whether the issue at hand is academic oversight (e.g., curriculum, programme review, faculty evaluation), institutional governance (e.g., strategic planning, budget oversight, hiring), or institutional support (e.g., student recruitment, alumni relations, cultural programmes) (Ward 2003: 55). Although a major component of faculty work, service activities often go unrewarded, particularly in research universities where service can be seen to take time away from research and scholarly activities (Ward 2003). Junior faculty therefore are often ‘shielded’ from campus service obligations, as they work toward tenure and promotion, while the service workloads of associate and full professors increase, as they ‘sacrifice’ their time to ‘protect’ junior faculty. In
these, and many other, ways, faculty serve their institutions with work that is typically temporary or short-term rather than a permanent endeavour.

When viewed from the associate dean perspective, service is an apt description of their administrative role. Associate deans perform a variety of tasks in support of their colleagues and college, which easily fall under the categories of academic oversight, institutional governance and institutional support mentioned earlier. Associate deans apply their knowledge of ‘the system’ and their ‘soft power’ to ‘help others’, ‘make an impact’, ‘make changes’, and ‘make a difference’. A full-time associate dean explained, ‘The other reason that I took [the position] is, I am a woman, full professor, and I have the power to help other women and faculty of colour in ways that a lot of women don’t. And so, to me I need to give back and help those people who have no power’ (AD16). The role also takes time and energy away from their personal and professional goals. As a result, they sacrifice their time and autonomy for a short time in the name of service: ‘I had had service obligations until receiving this and until being asked to do this, and so, I can’t get a lot of research done. But these things have to be, jobs have to be done, and we all have to take a turn’ (AD21). Half-time associate deans, in particular, emphasised the idea of ‘taking turns’. Indeed, one described the role as a ‘tour of duty,’ a temporary sacrifice for one’s academic community.

Where the dark side is a challenge to associate deans’ faculty status made by others, serving at the pleasure of the dean is a challenge created by their choice to serve. In resolving this tension, they conceptualise their administrative work as service, thereby giving purpose and meaning to the personal and professional sacrifices they make. Serving as service restores a sense of autonomy and connects to their role in the system. In this way, associate deans reconcile their administrative status with their faculty status.

Discussion

This study sought to explore role conflict and ambiguity in the associate deanship through the lens of liminality in order to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of this middle management role. When viewed as a liminal position, we find that associate deans experience conflict and ambiguity, not simply because their faculty and administrator roles carry ‘incongruent’ behaviour expectations, as role theory maintains, but because these roles have conflicting, if not contradictory, meanings within the social landscape of the university. F. G. Bailey (1977: 12) casts the difference
between faculty members and administrators in terms of competing themes of community and organisation:

Those who subscribe to the myth of organization look for a product, prefer one that can be measured and so insist on accountability, and define the normal and healthy relationship between people as essentially impersonal. The myth of community reverses each of these values: people are to be treated in the round, as ends in themselves rather than instruments at the service of an organization; the community has no particular product and is intrinsically valued, as an end in itself, and to ask for accountability is at best a misunderstanding and at worst a wicked perversion of the true nature of the institution.

To the extent that we accept or reject these characterisations, they highlight the tremendous social and cultural shift involved for faculty who accept an administrative appointment outside their academic department. The move is ‘like going to a new planet’ (Foster 2006). To make sense of the changes in perspective and relationships experienced, associate deans must (re)negotiate the meaning of concepts shared, but not agreed upon, between faculty and administrators, such as decisions, rules, process, hierarchy, service, administration and the university itself. In this way, associate deans begin a process of transition that readies them for, but does not necessarily compel them to, continued administration, for their attitudes about these new ‘tribal esoterica’ vary. In the end, role conflict and ambiguity are contests of meaning (Wright 1994) as much as they are structural incongruences, for the structures themselves are socially constructed. Thus, while we might expect those with full-time appointments to have a more clearly defined social status as administrator than do part-time associate deans, faculty do not distinguish along this temporal dimension and instead treat all associate deans as having ‘crossed over’. Likewise, associate deans, as faculty themselves, are compelled to reconcile this socio-spatial move, regardless of their full-time or part-time status, which they do through the idea of ‘service’. Full-time versus part-time status appears most salient in associate deans’ construction of the idea of service, for half-time associate deans were more likely to draw on the idea of ‘taking turns’.

Role conflict and ambiguity are not unique to the associate deanship. Strong parallels can be drawn between the associate dean role and those of department chair and dean, who, like associate deans, liaise between faculty and administration (Bowman 2002; Carroll and Wolverton 2004;
Montez et al. 2002; Wolverton et al. 2005; Wolverton et al. 1999). However, whereas ‘the chair position is a job that is performed as part of a faculty career’ (Carroll and Wolverton 2004: 6), and whereas the dean position is, likewise, a job that is performed as part of an administrator career, the associate dean position cannot be situated spatiotemporally as easily or firmly. I argue that this is because the role of associate deans in the social construction of the university is as, if not more, important as their role in its administration. Foster (2006: 49) contends that ‘creativity is the university’s business, and the creative faculty, staff, and students must be separated from business functions and standard ways of thinking to ensure maximum creative license’. Associate deans not only manage business functions for the academic departments in the college on behalf of the dean but also protect the creative side from ‘standard ways of thinking’, and thus work to preserve the university, as constituted by faculty and administrators. As one associate dean (AD4) remarked, ‘The university is an idea after all’.

However, if, as Foster (2006: 49) continues, ‘The boundary between the two sides of the university organization must be maintained in ways that sustain the creative environment’, then it follows that anything that threatens this boundary is a threat to the university itself. Neoliberal policies and reforms have altered the structures and organisation of universities to the point that Ginsberg (2011) has already declared ‘the fall of the faculty’ and ‘the rise of the all-administrative university’. If true, then the number of middle managers will continue to grow as will the stress and pressures of the associate dean role. Recruiting and retaining faculty willing to work in the liminality of academic middle management is more urgent than ever. At the same time, the research presented here shows that the dichotomy between faculty and administrators is more complex than captured in the notion of an ‘all-administrative university’. Therefore, we need to understand better the familiar but often over-simplified cultural politics of universities. Anthropologists are well positioned to contribute a richer, more nuanced understanding of the university through ethnographic research. Institutions of higher education dedicated to protecting and preserving the idea of the university should be equally dedicated to the recruitment and professional development of its future academic leaders.
Liminality in academic middle management

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Notes

1. I use ‘associate deanship’ to denote the ambiguous time and place between the culturally recognised and fixed statuses of faculty and administrator rather than an officially sanctioned office. Indeed, it is the lack of social recognition that creates conflict and ambiguity for associate deans, despite the position’s official title within the job classification systems of higher education institutions.

References


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