

Roles and Tasks for the Provost in a Developing University

*Ted Ward, G. W. Aldeen Professor of International Studies, Mission, and Education
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Professor Emeritus of International Studies and Education, Michigan State University
April 1999
Copyright 1999 by Ted Ward*

Many people are unsure what a provost does and why a university needs one. The curiosities about the provost appear everywhere. This condition is not surprising since even the very large universities mix-and-match their administrators' titles and tasks as if intending to keep people guessing. Does the chancellor report to the president or vice-versa? Why does the chancellor's role mysteriously appear and disappear except in New York and California? Does *vice president* indicate helpfulness or inability to think up a clearer title? How many does a university need? In reference to the provost, even the pronunciation is in doubt; some universities say PROHvust, others say PRAHvust, and some, borrowing from the military habits, say PROH-VOST and think in terms of police supervision.

More to the point of today's auspicious event, what in the world does a provost do? That, too, is subject to whimsical variations. But since the provost's roles have emerged from necessity rather than from tradition or abstraction, the tasks they address are commonly pragmatic. Often described as the *dean of the deans*, the provost is as important to today's multi-faceted academic governance as oil is to an engine. He is not the focal enunciator for detailed purposes and individual programs; that role still belongs to the deans. He is not the decision-maker in academic standards and practice; that is still the faculty. He is not the budgetary provider and overseer of fiscal matters; that is still the financial officer's and the president's cabinet's domain. But in virtually everything that pertains to the classical responsibilities of the deans, the provost is the academic leader, the coordinator, arbitrator, adjudicator, and ultimately, the decision-maker in matters of overlap and interaction among the several deans' domains.

Without a provost's insuring that the deans do not overwhelm one another with their zeal for dominance and budgetary preference, the president would be called upon constantly for peace-making and bandaging wounded administrators. The provost's major contribution, then, often turns out to be empowering the president and the board to focus their attention on larger policy issues and funding rather than constantly struggling to balance the emotional and intellectual energies of the university's management.

The Provost as Wise Administrator. Nothing is so likely to qualify a provost as a substantial variety of experiences as an outstanding educator, as a professor and administrator. "Knowing the system" is so very important that many provosts are appointed from inside the institution. This procedure ranks high in terms of initial take-charge decision making, but it often proves to be a mistake, because an "insider" usually brings into the provost's office a bundle of previous presuppositions, habits, indebtedness to certain colleagues, and "old visions" of the institutions and its purposes.

The case for the outside appointment is stronger if the new provost brings a broader perspective and a quick-learner's eagerness to learn the culture and persons of the university. But what counts even in today's arena of conflict, chaos, and change is the provost's wisdom. Not to be swept into every controversy and thus to lose judgment on priorities, not to enter prematurely into decisions that should be made by deans, not to avoid the difficult and urgent snags simply because of lack of time, patience, and conceptual insight--these are the tests of adequate wisdom.

The provost's wisdom is apt to be sorely tested in the emerging century over issues of federal and state regulation of private academic policies. These issues will seem simple only to an unwise doctrinaire administrator who chooses to "stand up for our rights" as if such posturing will come to terms with the profoundly difficult issues of the private institutions' having become virtually dependent on largesse from the public treasury.

Another test of the wisdom of the provost will arise as the matter of tenure policies and faculty appointment procedures comes in for their inevitable overhaul. Surely the escalating costs of institutional education have made higher education an enormously expensive essential commodity; thus various accommodations in fiscal policy are becoming evident. Only the institutions which are led wisely, bravely, and well will survive.

Wisdom comes not just from age and experience but from a commitment to worthy values and the intellectual competencies to synthesize decisions about complex issues so that they are reliably faithful to those values. Christian educational institutions have not emphasized competencies at the higher end of Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Outcomes*. Synthesizing and basing judgments on higher reasoning processes do not come easily for many administrators. But the problem goes far beyond the Christian institutions; today's society often is content with a sort of homely wisdom that comes from warm fuzzy feelings about life, honor, and happiness. The media reflect this in terms of wisdom defined in pragmatic terms of survival and public approval of the sort that polls can reflect. Not only does this set a painfully low standard, but it suggests a false equation: popularity is integrity.

By contrast, the Christian basis of wisdom is explicit, grounded, and unique. The provost in a Christian university must exemplify, as thoroughly as any other administrator, the commitment to the Holy Bible as the basis for truth, order, and purpose. This administrator must make decisions as openly and responsibly as integrity demands. The provost in the Christian university must be a person of prayer and dedication to godly values in the development of deans, faculties, and students. And he must be careful to communicate effectively with all those who have a stake in the office, persistently reaffirming by word and deed that the provost's wisdom is grounded in Christian virtue.

The wise provost is a careful caretaker of details but is never so preoccupied with the chaff and the static that the big picture gets blurred. This administrator draws merit from keeping the important things first, foremost, and clear.

The Provost as Referee. In a high-stakes sporting event, the referee cannot sit back and watch the game from the stands. For the provost, as for the referee, staying up with the major plays, following closely the movement of the ball, being alert for misuses and abuses of command and action, and quickly getting involved when things threaten to take undisciplined turns are the demands of the office. The provost goes beyond this referee analogy, because the provost is fundamentally biased and *should* be!

The provost is an active player. The provost is interested in the outcomes of the “game.” The provost carries leadership duties that go far beyond “calling balls and strikes.” But the provost who does not attend to keeping his deans in balance and off each others’ backs is sure to discover that the most powerful dean will be running the university in a very short time.

Although not the most attractive parts of the provost’s daily work-plan, reducing anxiety and heading off unproductive competition should be near the top. Encouraging all the deans and assuring each that the provost is paying attention and intends to provide appropriate support are the components of a strategy that moves the administrators toward a creative and minimally competitive behavior.

Another extension of the “referee” metaphor is reflected in the necessity that the provost must be the judge, jury, and penalty officer. Although the provost is well advised to inform the president systematically (sometimes necessarily through an executive vice-president) regarding the controversies and issues which are troubling the deans, the inter-dean conflicts are most often the domain of the provost.

The Provost as Educational Strategist. The professionalism of the provost begins with competency in policy development, budgeting, management, and faculty development. It goes much beyond these essential skills. The provost can do the job with these four, but excellence and the profound positive effect that the provost can have are dependent on a visionary projection of educational strategies.

This competency begins in a capacity to project a vision of the institution, realistically yet expansively imagining the resources, the institutional posture, and the legacy of hope and faith so as to focus and inspire the intentions and commitments of those who deliver the educational experiences to the learners. In this time of wildly expanding educational missions, media, and motivations, the educational strategist must be level-headed and slow to follow fads.

Today’s educational technologies focus on remote and “distant” delivery systems. It will require careful leadership to steer through this morass. On the one hand, reaching out to atypical learners with new categories of educational experiences will be an important element in the emergent shift to higher education as service. But to deny learners the support and enrichment of human interaction would be a tragic regression. Learning is far more than a solitary experience. Indeed,

it is far more than a teacher-learner hierarchy. Learning is social adventure. The competency of provosts in the next decade may well hinge on how effectively they handle this truth over against the rising tide of influences toward cost-cutting and resultant depersonalizing of learning.

The Provost as Former Nice Guy. Perhaps it is too mundane to consider among these matters, but the provost is not going to be effective if personal involvement with other administrators, especially the deans and the department chairpersons, is suspected of being important in the provost's choices and decision-making.

In my middle-career years when my role at the university became more administrative than faculty, I came to understand one of our homely habits in a new light. Among the more gregarious and easy-going departments, there was a ritual about which I had been ambivalent. We generally celebrated when one of our colleagues became a chairperson or a dean. It was a simple little office party. Some cake or cookies, a few short and often silly speeches, and that was it. But it was always called a "farewell party." As if the honoree was in fact on the way out, the speeches often took on the theme of "it's been good to know you." This part made me uneasy. Why create an additional sense of separation between the faculty and the administration? But when it was my turn I saw it differently. Just as surely as every graduate student and faculty member has many occasions to say, "I just want to teach, not become an administrator," even so most who become *good* administrators did not crave the job. They would have been ever so happy to keep exactly the same circle of friends with the same basis of friendship and the same comradely banter. But it doesn't work that way.

The administrator's responsibilities and zones of decision-making force too many choices between popularity and wisdom. At Michigan State, the "farewell party" for our friend and colleague who was taking on a new responsibility was an eloquent expression of the craving to maintain both integrity and friendship. The basis had to change unless we wanted to handicap our colleague. The "farewell party" really said it: a ritual of cancellation--cancellation of the backlog of favors and assumptions about professional decisions being based on friendship and social status as "fishing buddies."

Many provosts and deans as well find this transformation awkward. They don't want the enjoyable friendships to deteriorate into estrangement and alienation. They struggle to maintain the warmth and humane personality that have brought about their eligibility for this elevated status in career, but they are wisely aware that one sure way toward incompetency is to try to be everyone's buddy. A new provost, just as surely as a new president, is well advised to reject the devastating peril that destroys many well-intentioned senior administrators: the passionate desire to be liked. A responsible decision maker in the affairs of academic policy cannot be continuously popular with everyone.

This is not to suggest that the provost should cultivate a cool aloofness. Far from it. The strengths of personality needed for competent teachers and leaders become even more important

in the provost. The provost's example will affect many. The provost's behavior will influence the whole institution. Every move will be watched. People around the provost, upward and downward in the hierarchy, will be interpreting what they see as a part of the social-emotional-spiritual signature of the university. Warmth, compassion, responsiveness, redemptive spirit, and personal concern must be evident if the Christian character of the institution is to be upheld.

The Provost as Prophet. In general, human beings make poor prophets, especially if they are self-selected! Surely the responsible prophetic voice speaks God's words *for* God, at God's bidding. Thus the provost does not become a prophet by virtue of taking on the title. Non-prophetic provosts are not hard to find.

Every Christian university would prefer that its senior leadership be prophetic in every sense of the word. The prophetic provost is motivated to think and speak from a basis in biblical truth. Further, such an administrator diligently applies biblical and theological insights to the practical pursuit of institutional goals.

The prophet, perhaps "visionary planner" is a more functional term, is far more than a dreamer. Imagination and compulsion for discovery are essential, but without the necessary tool skills, an inquiring and projective speculator is more a liability than an asset. In this time of technological wonderment, especially, it is not enough to have ideas. Ideas flow freely from all sorts of sources. Indeed, the wealth of ideas within an educational institution often becomes a problem in itself, flooding the agenda with too many competing notions of what could and should be done.

The provost as visionary planner needs basic disciplines. The persistent bias of the social scientist identifies many of these as falling within the liberal arts emphases of the social sciences. In any case certain skills underlie prophetic vision; these are definable and worth learning:

Flexible perspectivism. A marvelous human attribute is the capacity to see things from more than one viewpoint. Apparently this is uniquely a human mental process. The provost must develop and utilize it constantly. A substantial part of the institution's effectiveness will depend on the provost's sorting out and reconciling of visions from many different sources. It is necessary, therefore, for the mind of this administrator to move sympathetically, objectively, and readily from one to another perspective while envisioning differentially and assessing the merits of contrasting assertions. This deliberate enhancement of this basic human skill, perspectivism, results in constantly increasing flexibility of decision-making, coupled tightly to the willingness to make clear choices and to persist in a decision, once made, without phlegmatic wandering. Indecision and aimlessness cannot hold things in place long enough for their fulfillment to be assessed and their consequences to be evaluated.

Long-range planning. Goal setting is a shared responsibility for the provost, but one that drives the provost's dealings with all administrative colleagues. Short-range planning and expediting is the hallmark of an out-of-control institution; surely it must be done, but when putting out fires and repainting the floor just ahead of the next step of progress dominate the

provost's agenda, something is wrong. Evaluative skills, the capability of determining appropriate objective and subjective indicators, must go hand-in-hand with long-range planning. It is not enough to spell out vague images of a better future. Exactly what purposes are most needful to drive the activities of the institution? Exactly what means, resources, and leadership are most promising to fulfill these purposes? Exactly what indicators need to be identified and logged in order to determine the consequences of these proposed efforts? It is from the "exactly what?" sorts of thinking that the best long-range plans emerge. Of course, all sorts of mid-course corrections will likely be needed to keep things on target, but professional planning for education expects that. In terms of the technological reasoning of today's battle fields, ballistics and aimed-once weaponry have given place to continuously aimed guided missiles.

Human relations. Lest the provost become enamored of the logic, strategy and technologies of the office, the skills and affective characteristics of sound human relations must be emphasized. Respect for others is the beginning point. A provost can self-destruct by using his own qualities and the power of the office as a club for bludgeoning other colleagues and subordinates. The wise provost knows the importance of a shared cup of coffee, keen observation, and shrewd assessment of people.

Paradigm assessment. The capacity to identify and cope with the conceptual imagery (paradigms) that dominates thinking within the institution is a product of deliberate efforts of the provost to comprehend the situation. A carefully nurtured awareness of the ways donors, sponsors, the policy board, parents, alumni, students and other major stakeholders are visualizing the worth, the purposes, and the predominant style of the university is the never-ending learning task. Since these mental habits change slowly but steadily, the most alert provost never really "catches up." A sort of lifelong learning is needed; it should be an outgrowth of habits of continuous interaction and assessment of these sectors of influential people. The overarching knowledge that this competency provides guards the provost from the territorial provincialisms that are common within the several colleges and their administrators. "The bigger picture" is a responsibility vested in the provost.

Eschatological discipline. The lore of curriculum specialists claims that every curriculum reflects a vision of the future. Indeed, one of the reasons that professional education has been the background of many of the outstanding futurists of recent years comes from the wise educators who know full well that the value of their curriculum will be assessed in a time not yet unfolded. To illustrate, a poorly planned, largely traditional curriculum full of long-standing content and out-of-date learning experiences reveals a view of the future as an extension of the past. What will be needed by learners in their futures is no different from what has been needed by previous learners. The world just ahead is assumed to be predictably similar to the world of previous generations.

Enlightened secular scholars speculatively build images of the future that that are intended to improve purpose-selection and goal-setting. Their images are more or less reliable, depending on scholarly logic, the command of appropriate data, and their capacity for wise synthesis.

The Christian scholar has an additional foundation from which to make decisions that will relate the educational efforts to the future. Through the scripture, the Christian educator can see the outlines of God's *grand plan*. God is active in human history, and God will bring all things to a just culmination in His own time.

The patriarch Joseph, one of God's greatest chosen prophets, was grounded in two areas of related knowledge: 1) In matters of "thus says the Lord, our God," he was educated in a God-fearing family and taught to shape his life by God's instructions to Israel. 2) Through his time in the personal servanthood and the civil service of the Pharaoh of Egypt he came to be aware of God's special hand on him for enhancement of his gifts of analysis and synthesis. Thus he was enabled to plan even in matters of weather cycles, long range planning, and public policy. He knew that God had a plan and that God was in control. Thus he formed his own plans and strategies enlightened by the futuristic vision that is available to those who are comparably obedient and trusting of the living God.

Similarly Nehemiah, the visionary rebuilders of Jerusalem, was learning from the observations and experiences of service in the court of King Artaxerxes. He had invested himself responsibly in learning the politics, logic, and engineering of restorative change. When the time was right, God brought all of these learnings together into Nehemiah's bold request to change jobs, change venue, change clothes, and to be changed personally into a leader of unexpected competency. Truly a marvel of God's eschatological revelation.

Is it too much to expect that the provost of a Christian university would make the same sort of investments and commitments in learning and service? Is it too much to suggest that the fulfillment of God's purposes and even God's interventions in human history come through the prepared investor's faithful continuation of the pursuit of God's views of the future?

Conclusion. Today's inductee to the esteemed order of provosts is not known to walk well upon water, even if it is frozen. He cannot be trusted to deliver daily miracles. In fact, his supernatural powers are constrained by the fact that first and foremost, he is an honorable servant of the living God and in specific ways his personal life and career are committed to serving God's people. His career has demonstrated the Christian attributes of humility, service, loyalty, perseverance, and integrity. Hope International University has recognized that this missionary-statesman is an educator's educator. He comes with the acknowledgment of many that his leadership and stature are a reflection of his deep commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Hope International University thus adds to its meritorious stature through this induction of Professor Edgar J. Elliston as its first provost.