

INTERIM ADMINISTRATORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A NATIONAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the roles and experiences of interim administrators in higher education. A survey was given to current and recent interim administrators in four-year public universities and colleges across the United States. The goals were to identify the advantages and disadvantages of using and serving as interims, and to solicit advice for institutions and individuals who are considering the interim role. Results of the study indicate that participants believe there are clear advantages to serving as an interim, such as gaining new skills and a broader perspective of the academic community, but there are also disadvantages, such as a loss of scholarship time and loss of colleague relationships. This paper offers guidance for potential interims and for the institutions where they are employed, as well as recommendations for future research.

INTRODUCTION

As the saying goes, “There is nothing permanent except change.” In the world of academia, change is a constant and with that change comes the need for interim leadership. Interims by definition are individuals who serve in a position on a temporary basis. Faculty agree to take on the interim administrative role for a number of different reasons, and the experiences of the interim are as diverse as the number of roles they fill. The focus of this paper is on the roles and experiences of interim administrators in higher education. A survey was given to current and recent interim administrators in four-year public universities and colleges across the United States. The goal of the survey was to identify the advantages and disadvantages of using and serving as interims, and to provide advice for institutions and individuals who are considering the interim role.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a dearth of research and scholarly articles in the professional literature regarding the selection and implementation of interim administrators in higher education. Although most of the published articles found on this

topic were anecdotal and described the experiences of one or two individuals who served as interims, a number of themes emerged. First, many of the authors delineated the advantages and disadvantages for individuals who are serving as interims, as well as benefits and drawbacks for the department or institution using interim administrators (Huff & Neubrandner, 2012; Munde, 2000). Most of the articles also provide tips for new interims (Rud, 2004; Powers & Maghroori, 2006) as well as advice for the institution seeking to hire a temporary administrator (Thompson, Cooper & Ebbers, 2012; Barbieri, 2005). All of the articles found in the literature focused on the qualitative experiences of one or more individuals who had served as interim academic administrators, including chairs, deans, provosts and presidents.

While individuals are frequently asked to accept an interim position with little notice or experience, some advantages for individuals who agree to serve in this capacity include being able to “try out” the job and gain valuable experience before deciding whether or not to apply for the permanent administrative position (Huff & Neubrandner, 2012; Rud, 2004). Administrative experience attained as an interim can also help to prepare individuals who choose to apply for future administrative positions. In

addition, serving in a leadership role provides individuals with a new perspective as they begin to view the university structure through a broader lens than was available within their previous roles (Huff & Neubrandner, 2012; Rud, 2004). Rud (2004) suggests that once individuals serve in an interim chair's role, they learn to be less judgmental and more appreciative of the chair's role when they return to faculty. Advantage identified for institutions that hire interims is that it allows others to observe the individuals in these roles before hiring them into the permanent position (Vaillancourt, 2012; Rud 2004), it gives the university more time to conduct a thorough search (Barbieri, 2005) and provides the university with some salary savings as they conduct the search (Huff & Neubrandner, 2012).

There are also numerous disadvantages for interim administrators cited in the literature. For example, sometimes individuals are called upon to perform a wide range of administrative functions without managerial training or experience (Powers & Maghroori, 2006). Vaillancourt (2012) argues that too often "interims are treated like interims" and are not perceived as being qualified enough to be appointed to the permanent role. In addition, interims are expected to make effective decisions that have both short and long-term implications for the academic unit without the luxury of having the time to build trust or long-term relationships with the faculty and staff. While interims will inevitably make mistakes, they may never have the chance to correct their mistakes or show the faculty and staff that they have learned from this experience because they are only in the position for a short time (Munde, 2000). Barbieri (2005) suggests that interims have a "short honeymoon period" because they are forced to work fast to get the job done. When describing her experiences as an interim, Vaillancourt (2012) discusses what she calls the "perils of interim appointments". She argues that a major disadvantage for the interim who wants to be considered for the permanent position is the temptation to avoid making controversial decisions because of the fear of how those choices will be perceived by those individuals who have influence over the hiring process. Having a policy that prevents the interim from applying for the permanent position or hiring interims from a professional firm are two alternative ways to address this potential conflict of interest (Munde, 2000). Anyaso (2009) discusses the use of former administrators who are able to "hit the ground running" since they have a good understanding of the position. Because these individuals would not be applying for the permanent position, the institution is free to conduct a cleaner search and the interim can focus on helping the institution prepare for their new leadership.

Munde (2000) describes the interim job responsibilities as being consumed by the routine tasks of leadership, which can be less rewarding than making and implementing long-term, strategic changes. He states that "leading in limbo is the hallmark of the interim experience." In addition, faculty and staff who are not in agreement with the interim's vision may be content to "wait them out" until a permanent administrator is hired while others may see this as an opportunity to quickly push their own agendas through the system (Huff & Neubrandner, 2012; Rud, 2004; Munde, 2000).

The literature provides tips for new interim administrators based on the challenges experienced or observed by the authors. For example, several articles advise interims to focus on moving the institution forward and to fulfill their job roles as if they are in the permanent position (Thompson, Cooper Ebbers, 2012; Huff & Neubrandner, 2012; Powers, & Maghroori, 2006; Barbieri, 2005; Rud, 2004). Simply serving as a placeholder administrator is rarely an option since interims are expected to make important decisions and strategic hires that will have both long and short-term consequences for their departments. Some of the responsibilities of the interim are directly related to their predecessors and the unpopular decisions that were made prior to them entering the interim position (Thompson, Cooper & Ebbers, 2012; Warner, 2009). In these situations interim administrators are advised to use this opportunity to help mend internal and external relationships and to facilitate healing among the unit's faculty and staff. In their qualitative study of two interim presidents, Thompson, Cooper and Ebbers (2012) identified some common themes related to repairing poor institutional morale caused by the previous administrators. The authors suggest that interims should promote openness and transparency and seek the counsel of key stakeholders as they attempt to build cohesion and trust among the staff. Similarly, Rud (2000) states interims should consider setting up regular faculty conversations to "give the impression of stability among change." Powers and Maghroori (2006) advise that it is important to remember that socializing is part of the job and they encourage interims to spend time visiting faculty in their offices to build relationships and encourage open communication.

The literature also provides some personal advice to interims and other aspiring administrators. For example, the importance of being open to criticism and avoiding taking things personally was suggested by several of the authors (Huff & Neubrandner, 2012; Warner, 2009; Powers & Maghroori, 2006). Barbieri, (2005) posits that being an interim demands a "healthy dose of humility" because it is so easy to get hurt feelings when one is reminded of the search committee's ongoing efforts to find a suitable replacement. Interims sometimes hear some negative com-

ments about their performance as a leader or previous decisions when they return to their original position (Rud, 2004). When this happens it is helpful to remember two pieces of sage advice. First, as an interim you should "leave your heart at the door" and not take criticism personally and second, remember this is the job you signed up for and be ready to move on when your services are no longer needed (Huff & Neubrandner, 2012; Barbieri, 2005).

METHOD

To find participants for this study a modified systematic sampling approach was conducted. After the researchers obtained a list of all four-year public universities and colleges in the United States, approximately every tenth school was selected while also ensuring that every state was represented. A graduate assistant was assigned to call administrative assistants at those schools and/or to explore their web sites to ascertain the names of interim academic administrators at the selected institutions. A total of 201 emails were sent to potential participants asking them to complete the survey in fall of 2013, with one email reminder sent out three days later. The purpose of the study and an informed consent was included in the email. Nine emails "bounced back" and 99 (51%) of individuals who received the email completed the online survey.

The survey questions were developed after the researchers conducted a small qualitative study of interim academic administrators in 2011. The survey focused on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of interim administrators and for the department or unit where s/he was employed. Other questions solicited advice for new interims while additional sections highlighted policy issues related to the hiring of interim administrators at their institutions. The information collected through this study can benefit individuals who are considering an interim role and will enable institutions to use interim academic administrators more effectively as they develop more fair and consistent policies.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were employed in a variety of administrative roles, with 39% serving as interim dean, 26% as interim department head/chair and 11% as interim provost. Other interim position titles included associate provost, associate dean, director and chancellor. The majority (78%) of participants stated they were recruited and/or asked to take on this role by higher administration, while 20% said they were in an assistant or associate position when they stepped into the interim role. The average length of time that participants served in the interim role at the time of the study ranged from six months to one

year (39%) while 43% stated they were in the interim position for over a year.

When asked what happened to their predecessors the participants gave a range of responses. Twenty-one percent stated that their predecessors left their university for another job, 20% reported that they had retired or resigned in good standing, 19% stated they were fired or asked to step down from the position and 16% stated their predecessors were promoted within the university. When asked if they plan to apply for the permanent position, 51% of the respondents said they were not applying while 11% said they had already applied. An additional 21% stated they were planning to apply and 25% indicated they were unsure as to whether or not they would apply for the permanent role.

RESULTS

Policy Issues

Few of the schools involved in this study have definitive policies related to the hiring of interim administrators. Only 31% of respondents said their schools had policies regarding the salaries provided to interim administrators and a small percentage (18%) said they had policies or guidelines related to the length of time one can serve in an interim role. There is also an absence of policies as to whether or not an individual serving in an interim role is allowed to apply for the permanent position, with 83% of respondents stating there was no policy to address this issue at their institution. When asked if their university tends to hire "internal" candidates into administrative positions, 67% of the respondents reported that those decisions tend to vary between positions, and only 9% of respondents indicated that this tendency had any influence over their decision whether or not to apply for the position. There also seems to be a lack of clarity relating to the terms "acting" and "interim" and only 9% of the participants said their institution distinguishes between the titles of "acting" versus "interim" administrative titles.

Disadvantages of Being in an Interim Role

Participants were asked about some of the challenges or disadvantages they faced while serving in an interim role (see Table 1). Many (60%) of the participants agreed that being in an interim position limits one's ability to do long-term strategic planning while about a third (34%) disagreed. Just over half (57%) of the participants indicated that it is a disadvantage when faculty/staff view interims as "temporary" while 21% disagreed with this statement. A majority (66%) of participants agreed that a disadvantage for individuals serving in an interim role is having to

A challenge or disadvantage of being in an interim role is...	SA	A	N	D	SD
Faculty/staff tend to view you as “temporary.”	13	44	21	14	6
Faculty/staff seem to lack confidence in your ability to do the job.	2	20	25	38	15
It limits your ability to do long-term strategic planning.	20	40	5	26	8
Your concern that making tough decisions might negatively affect support for you being selected the permanent position.	12	24	18	29	17
Faculty/staff are choosing to “wait you out” until you leave.	7	37	21	26	9
You make less money than you would in the “permanent” position.	17	25	13	29	16
Higher administration (e.g. Chancellor or President/Provost) does not acknowledge you as the “leader” of your unit.	1	12	14	40	34
It is difficult to build community relationships as an interim.	6	27	17	33	17
It is difficult to begin and follow through with initiatives to raise money because you are in an interim position.	12	30	26	29	3
Returning to a position with individuals whom you previously supervised.	7	25	28	31	8
Having to put one’s own professional goals or scholarship on hold.	20	46	9	21	3

** Percentage of Respondents who selected strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (D) or strongly disagree (SD)

put one’s professional or scholarship goals on hold. While the participants did not seem as strongly concerned that there about the potential disadvantages for faculty and staff who are working under an interim administrator (see Table 2), 52% agreed that there is a sense of anxiety related to perceived instability of the unit among the faculty and staff when there is an interim administrator in place.

An analysis of the narrative comments yielded some interesting themes related to the disadvantages for interim administrators. Several respondents described the extensive amount of work required for the interim while receiving

only a minimal pay increase. For example, some of the respondents commented on how their workload increased because they were expected to continue to meet their previous job responsibilities while also taking on new administrative duties. One individual wrote that “it was a huge amount of work for no sustained appointment.” Others noted that their relationships with colleagues changed and this was seen as a loss. One respondent stated, “the biggest surprise was the change in attitude toward me by people I considered colleagues and friends. I also saw a very different side to people in the way they treated others.” Another

A Disadvantage for faculty, staff, or departments who are working with an interim administrator is...	SA	A	N	D	SD
There is a sense of anxiety related to instability among the faculty/staff.	7	45	28	14	6
Programs cannot move forward with their own initiatives.	1	20	19	51	9
There is a lack of leadership within the department/unit.	1	10	20	51	18
There is perception that there is a lack of commitment to the department/unit from the interim administrators.	2	10	19	54	15
It contributes to low faculty/staff morale.	1	13	23	43	17

** Percentage of Respondents who selected strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (D) or strongly disagree (SD)

challenge identified by respondents was the difficulty of working with a predecessor who is still employed at the institution and is unable to give up full control of the position. One respondent commented that it was a challenge because of the “inability of the person who formally held the job and is still on campus to ‘give up the reins.’” Last, respondents commented on the disadvantages associated with beginning a job with little training or preparation and/or with little institutional support, along with the perception that one is seen as “good enough to be interim but not good enough to be permanent.”

Advantages of Being in an Interim Role

Participants were asked several questions about the advantages of being in an interim role (see Table 3). Fifty-seven percent of respondents agreed that having an interim administrator allows for difficult decisions and changes to be made without compromising new long-term departmental leadership and 67% agreed that interims have the

advantage of being able to resolve long standing issues before a permanent administrator is hired or begins. A large majority of respondents (81%) agreed that serving as an interim gives one an opportunity to “try out” the job before applying for it and 94% agreed that being in an interim roles gives one a broader university perspective and understanding regarding the politics of conducting university business.

The participants were also questioned about the advantages for the faculty and staff who work with an interim administrator (Table 4). The majority (92%) of respondents agreed that having an opportunity to observe the interim’s leadership style and abilities was an advantage for the individuals who work with them. Most (89%) agreed that another advantage is that they are able to work with someone they already know and with whom they have a relationship. The majority (73%) also agreed that an additional advantage of using interims is that it give the institution more time to conduct a thorough job search

An ADVANTAGE of being in an interim role is...	SA	A	N	D	SD
...difficult decisions and changes can be made without compromising new long-term departmental leadership	5	48	24	16	0
...you are able to resolve long standing issues before permanent administrator is hired or begins.	14	49	18	12	1
...it gives you an opportunity to “try out” the job before applying for it.	30	47	9	6	3
...you are able to make more money than in your previous position.	14	48	15	11	7
...gives you a broader university perspective and understanding regarding the politics of conducting university business.	44	46	4	1	0

** Percentage of Respondents who selected strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (D) or strongly disagree (SD)

An ADVANTAGE for faculty/staff/departments who are working with an interim administrator is...	SA	A	N	D	SD
...it gives faculty/staff an opportunity to observe the interim’s leadership style/abilities.	24	62	8	0	0
...the faculty/staff already “know” the person in the interim role and/or have a relationship with that person.	24	50	16	3	1
...it gives the institution more time to perform a thorough job search while providing the university with some salary savings.	17	51	17	6	1
...it provides stability and continuity within the department/unit.	16	56	18	3	1

** Percentage of Respondents who selected strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (D) or strongly disagree (SD)

while providing the university with some salary savings. Last, the most participants agreed (77%) that having an interim administrator provides stability and continuity within the department or unit.

The narrative comments concerning the advantages for the interim focused on the unique opportunity to try out the job. Skills acquired in the new position were seen as a great advantage along with exposure to a variety of administrators and deans. Several respondents indicated that serving in an interim role helps to prepare individuals for future administrative positions and gives them a different university perspective. One respondent commented that having an interim in place gives the institution "time to conduct a proper search while providing a nice transition from the old leadership to the new".

Advice for the Interim

Respondents were asked an open-ended question about what advice they might give someone who is considering taking on an interim administrative role. The most frequent advice given was to focus on the job "as if you are not an interim". One respondent stated, "act like you have the permanent job and make decisions for the long term and in the best interest of the organization." New interims were advised to have a frank discussion with their college administrators regarding the job responsibilities, the interim salary and what will happen when the interim job is over. They advised that individuals need to ask themselves if this is a good fit for them in the long run and be ready to give up time that is normally spent focusing on one's own scholarship. Many of the respondents commented that serving in an interim role can be a great learning experience for the individual who is interested in applying for a future administrative position.

DISCUSSION

Taking on the role of an interim can be both an enriching and a disheartening experience influenced by a number of factors, including the circumstances that resulted in the need for an interim in the first place. For example, was it a planned exit where the predecessor left in good standing, or was it a sudden exit caused by an extreme event such as a firing, illness, death or a scandal? Was the predecessor a respected administrator who left the unit in good shape, or was s/he a poor manager who was reviled by the faculty and staff? The extreme circumstances can result in an extra layer of work for interims. Not only do they have to learn on the job, but they have to potentially deal with grief or mistrust by the faculty and staff as they work to repair broken relationships and build cohesion and trust within the unit. The circumstances under which an in-

terim takes over are significant and should be taken into consideration as one decides whether or not to take on the interim role.

It is advisable for potential interims to ask for expectations in writing such as salary, length of position, option to apply for the permanent position and details about how/if they might return to their previous position. All these particulars should be determined prior to taking the position. Individuals who neglect to attend to these details at the beginning of their term risk serving in the interim role for an extended period of time with a lower salary than is desirable, while putting one's own professional goals and scholarship on hold.

Individuals should decide if the opportunity to serve as an interim is a good fit for them depending where they are in their own career path. Becoming an interim takes a new mindset, and they have to function like they are in a permanent role while also keeping in mind that their days in this position are limited. Paradoxically, higher administration often expects interims to function as if they are the permanent administrator. For example, they may be charged with working with faculty on unit strategic plans knowing they are unlikely to be around to help implement it. Successful interims somehow find a way to balance these expectations while making the tough decisions, thinking long-term and implementing the job as if they are in the permanent role. In doing so, interims should know they also risk being unpopular and losing friendships among their colleagues. They also learn new perspectives related to the university structure and gain valuable skills as they prove to themselves and others that they can do the job effectively. They leave the position and the college/unit better than they found it.

The results of the survey suggest that the interim position can be a big advantage to both the faculty member and to the university. It give both parties the chance to "test drive" the relationship without a long-term commitment. One should keep in mind that being an interim has its own unique challenges, including having to do the job in a short, time-limited period without the luxury of having time to nurture collegial relationships and build rapport. Also, every decision and mistake will be closely monitored by the unit faculty and staff which can put them somewhat at a disadvantage if they are being compared to external candidates who are also applying for the position. It can also be awkward as they go through the interviewing process. They should expect fewer people to show up for their presentation or open interviews than would come to meet with an external candidate who is not known to the faculty or staff.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of all survey research is the risk that those who had a very positive or negative experience may have decided not to participate in the study. In addition, some potential respondents may not have received the survey because they had left the position or the university before receiving the email request to participate in the study. There were also a number of questions that were not addressed in the survey and some potential questions for future research are outlined below.

- ▶ What percentage of interim administrators choose to resign if they are not selected for the permanent position, and what is the long-term impact on the university?
- ▶ What impact does gender and ethnicity have on the selection of interims, their salaries and whether or not one is selected for the permanent position?
- ▶ What percentage of universities have specific policies related to the use of interim administrators, and how do these policies affect the individual interim and the institution?
- ▶ At the end of the interim experience, whether or not one is selected as the successful candidate, it is helpful to remember that this is what you signed up for. It is important to effectively manage and make decisions that have long term impact on the unit, interims must also make personal preparations for the position to end. One of the participants of this study summed up the feelings of many of the respondents by stating, "the experience was tough but rewarding. And I am glad it is over."

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