

Making Time for Big-Picture Thinking

A major challenge of being a department chair is maintaining your focus on strategic thinking while handling all the details of day-to-day operations. It's a difficult balance, but integrating big-picture thinking into your daily schedule can make the strategic planning more manageable and can help maintain momentum.

At Lansing Community College, department chairs are full-time administrators. Their schedules, driven by meetings, fill up quickly, leaving little time to devote specifically to strategic planning.

For Anand Ramaswami, chair of the Mathematics and Computer Science Department, and Tom Deits, Science Department chair, the key to finding the time to think strategically is to put it on the calendar; otherwise it can easily get squeezed out by more immediate concerns.

"It's very important to set aside some time each day that is devoted to strategic planning. For example, 2 to 3 o'clock on Wednesday is blocked off on my calendar. No one can make an appointment with me then. If I didn't set aside that much time, then it just would get pushed away because something else would happen during that time," Ramaswami says.

In addition to setting aside time to think strategically, Deits makes it a point to track even the smallest tasks.

"My observation of this job is that it's easy to get 'nibbled to death by ducks.' There are so many little things that need to be done. They're not unimportant, but each one is quite small," Deits says.

Deits takes the time to enter each task and other relevant information in Outlook, giving him a list of tasks he needs to accomplish, which enables him to choose what to work on next depending on its urgency and the amount of time it will take.

Entering tasks into Outlook also

makes it easier to follow up. If there is a question about a specific task, Deits can easily check its status (assuming he took the time to update the status in Outlook).

Another way that Deits keeps track of his many tasks is by using a desktop search feature, which enables him to search his computer from a single source.

"Sometimes in the formal meetings, you will hear what the faculty think you want to hear. Sometimes around the coffeepot, you get a better sense of what the real concerns are. It's time-consuming, but that's strategic planning."

About half of Deits' days are devoted to meetings, and he has the "small but important stuff" scheduled in Outlook, leaving about 15 percent of his time left over for strategic work—"talking to people about where we're going next.

"I'm grateful to have that much time. I'm guessing that most chairs would consider that luxurious. That's what efficiency can buy you—those few precious minutes that allow you to reflect," Deits says.

Given the limited amount of time available for strategic thinking, Deits makes it a point to keep the big picture in his thoughts regardless of what he is working on. "I'm never only thinking in the small," he says. For example, during a recent hands-on science event for visiting children, he is thinking more generally about outreach and how this rela-

tively new event contributes to the department's objectives. "I'm asking myself, 'How's it working?' I'm thinking about what outreach programs are missing, and how this is going to fit into our next program."

This type of thinking is one of the things Deits enjoys most about his job. "If I didn't have the time for strategic thinking, the quality of this job would just go right down for me. I'm trying all the time to grow and think and change and figure out how to influence how the college is operating. It's very gratifying to do that. If people aren't doing that, they should be, because you've got to have that horizon out there. Otherwise this job sort of becomes like painting the Golden Gate Bridge. By the time you get to one end, it's time to go back and start painting it again. The students come in, and you've got to run the classes. Classes end, and things start over again. That cycle is not what this job is about. That's part of what this job is about, but it's not what chairs should live exclusively."

Although they have more time to devote to the chair position than department chairs who also continue their research and scholarship roles, Ramaswami and Deits still need to enlist the help of faculty on strategic planning.

"I strongly believe that you have to try to build the people around you. I delegate certain things to our faculty, like looking at the transferability of some of our courses to another college. I want to try to get 'buy in' from all the faculty in various roles, whether it's trying to develop a new course or looking at an articulation agreement with a four-year college. I try to have them involved because, of course, one chair can't do everything," Ramaswami says.

Ramaswami and Deits have regular

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operations of the academic areas that person oversees. The timing of the weeks of leave will be approved in advance by an administrator's immediate supervisor and the vice president of the undergraduate college and is subject to change depending on the needs of the college. The flexible sabbatical is an alternative to, but does not replace, the full-sabbati-

cal option available to academic administrators. The flexible sabbatical proposal follows the same guidelines as the semester-long sabbatical option, providing a detailed overview of the research to be conducted during the leave and how that research will benefit the administrator and the college.

The concept of the flexible sabbatical was well received by the vice president and president at my college. It was also

warmly received by my administrative colleagues, many of whom believe that their own departments will benefit from this untraditional, yet truly viable, way of supporting academic administrators as they strive both to lead and to learn in the twenty-first century academy.

Sara E. Quay is dean of the School of Education at Endicott College in Beverly, Mass. ▼

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meetings with the faculty in their departments. The main reason for these meetings in Ramaswami's department is for faculty to update him and each other on the status of the various projects they're working on.

Ramaswami also meets with each faculty member one-on-one each week. "We talk about what they're doing, upcoming events, and whatever concerns they have regarding departmental matters. I think it's important to have that rapport with the faculty instead of just meeting with them when there is an issue."

At the department meeting, Deits

expects representatives in each discipline to report on the status of their work, from the routine operations to their portions of the strategic plan. He also keeps the agenda open enough to allow for faculty to add items to it. Deits also makes it a point to meet individually with each faculty member.

"A lot of one-on-one interaction has to go on as well. You need to get people in unguarded moments to get a real sense of what the department's needs are. Sometimes in the formal meetings, you will hear what the faculty think you want to hear. Sometimes around the coffee pot, you get a better sense of what the real concerns are. It's time-consuming, but that's strategic planning.

"Walk the halls. Find people. Be prepared to spend some time with people. Usually if I can capture somebody at that moment when they are relatively free, I get some good interactions with them. Making appointments seems to take some of the juice out of those meetings."

Deits compares this form of communication with that of a bartender: "I get the conversation going and shut up if I can."

Contact Anand Ramaswami at ramaswaa@lcc.edu and Tom Deits at deitst@lcc.edu. ▼

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goal of sending 30 students to France each year was unrealistic, and taking in more students than it was sending would be a financial burden for Thomas College.

Thomas College offered the French students courses in international marketing, international business, economics, finance, and the liberal arts. To minimize costs, the French students preselected their courses before arriving on campus and were placed so that they could be accommodated without having to create new course sections. Interest in the program among Thomas College students grew slowly; informal presentations from students who had participated in the exchange proved to be an

effective marketing tool. (Now, in addition to marketing the program internally, Thomas College has these students make presentations to local high schools, which has helped recruit students to the college as well as the exchange program.)

Throughout development and implementation of this exchange program, Thomas College did not have an office of international education or an administrative position dedicated to international studies. Much of the work fell to Bressler, who immediately sought support from the administration.

"I don't think we could have done the program without the full support of the administration. They're the critical players in this. They control budgets. They make or break a program, so being able to come up with good data that enables

you to demonstrate how important it is to have a program like this is absolutely essential," Bressler says.

Another crucial factor that contributed to the program's success was selecting the right partner. "It's important that you have complementary goals and that you understand each others' curriculum," Bressler says.

Faculty involvement is also important because they are the ones who will be teaching these exchange students, which can call for different teaching methods.

Martin Bressler is currently a professor of marketing and entrepreneurship at Houston Baptist University. Contact him at mbressler@hbu.edu. ▼

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