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Upstairs/Downstairs: Moving up and down through leadership roles

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In academic leadership, one of the many challenges involves transitioning across leadership roles. Department Chairs may move up into Associate Dean or Dean roles; likewise they may move “down” from Dean roles back to faculty or Chair roles. This presentation highlights some of the challenges and opportunities that come with such upward and downward movement.

Moving up means learning a new role and becoming familiar with disciplines outside of our own and understanding their needs. For Dr. Pomper, who moved between institutions, this involved understanding the needs of lab sciences, the considerations for lab safety, or building technical programs as well as the culture of a new college, when he became Dean of Mathematics and Science. For Dr. Thomas Evans, who stayed at the same institution, it meant looking broadly across the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and being able to weigh the needs of one department versus the needs of another along with interacting with a much broader range of faculty. Another crucial step in successfully navigating the upward trajectory is letting go of the old role and not getting in the new chair’s way. He or she needs to establish him/herself without interference. Moving up at the same institution might also mean working with the former Associate Dean/Dean if he/she remained at the institution.

When returning to a former role, in this instance described as moving down, Dr. Pomper was faced with adapting to a new teaching load, getting to know new faculty, and learning about changes that had taken place over five years. It means accepting that processes and programs that he had previously established had changed, understanding the ramifications for this change, and adapting to the new circumstances.

In this presentation, we present scenarios of potential challenges in being upwardly/downwardly mobile. Audience members will work in groups on the scenarios and develop suggestions for how to tread these steps with caution while at the same time embracing their new role.

Takeaway: Faculty will examine the role of different levels of leadership, and the challenges of transitioning from one role to another. Scenarios will include:

- The potential conflict that arises when a chair stays at the same institution and moves up to a new role. In this situation, the chair needs to delineate between the role of the new position and providing the successor with the appropriate guidance to allow for a smooth transition and enough freedom to define his or her own leadership style.
- The potential for conflict when a returning chair needs to adapt to new processes that were established while he held a position outside of the department.
- The difficulties that may arise when a chair moves up to a new position outside of the current institution. This may include a different institutional culture and becoming acquainted with disciplines outside one’s own.

Through critical examination of these case studies, participants develop strategies for transitioning between leadership roles.