Making the Leadership Transition is the first in a series of four articles about how higher education administrators can make a successful transition from four-year to two-year institutions. The other articles focus on the organizational structure of community colleges, communicating with the student body, and colleague relations.

One of the most significant challenges community colleges face is the large number of administrative retirements that are affecting their staffing levels. Because turnover is so extensive, many administrative positions have become accessible to candidates outside the community college setting. College of DuPage, a suburban community college in Illinois, is among the many institutions in which most academic administrators appointed in the last five years are new to the college. For example, in the Liberal Arts Division, all five academic administrators (the authors of this series) and the director of Performing Arts are new both to the institution and to administrative work at community colleges in general.

Coming from a variety of four-year institutions—a private liberal arts college, a private art and design institution, a for-profit institution, and state university systems—we had to learn a great deal when making the transition to a two-year institution. Although some of us have taught at other community colleges and have held administrative positions at the four-year level, we had no prior experience in academic administration at the community college level. We share the following observations with an awareness that much of what we say may not apply to all community colleges and that each institution, both two-year and four-year, has its own culture and priorities. Nonetheless, we hope these points prove useful as you make your own leadership transition.

Many community colleges today have a mission that identifies them as “comprehensive,” which indicates that they serve their entire district in multiple ways. In rural areas, a district may encompass two or three counties. A comprehensive suburban institution, such as College of DuPage, responds to a multitude of constituencies via multiple delivery formats. It serves not only traditional transfer students and vocational students, but also many other groups, including children, teens, seniors, corporate and business partners, continuing learners, and special groups such as public service employees.

The comprehensive community college has, therefore, not one mission, but multiple missions. For the administrators who lead and manage the institution, the primary challenge is to connect and integrate a
diverse environment composed of multiple cultures, populations, and hierarchies. For academic administrators new to community colleges, this is no easy task.

We have developed the following list as a general aid for those who are new to administration in the community college setting. In related articles, we will explore three specific topics in depth: (1) the organizational structure of community colleges, (2) communicating with the student body, (3) and colleague relations.

ADVICE FOR THE ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATOR NEW TO A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Community colleges are exciting places of learning that provide new administrators with much opportunity for change and growth. The following are a few suggestions to help make a successful transition:

• Read the literature about community colleges.

• Be open-minded—you are making a leap of faith; make no assumptions.

• Listen and observe for a long time before making big changes, and make only small changes at first. Colleagues will quickly tell you that community colleges are much different from four-year institutions, and require that things be done a certain way. Your new colleagues are correct.

• Find out about your state community college governing board and what policies and guidelines you should be aware of.

• At the community college level, the issues of leadership and management are often addressed in more abstract ways than at four-year institutions. Cultivate and articulate your own management style so everyone knows that you know what you are doing and why.

• Remember that some colleagues may be uncomfortable with the fact that you come from a four-year institution, especially one with a focused mission such as an art institution.

• Be aware that community college administrative jobs entail long hours at the office. Community programming is offered seven days and many nights a week, and administrators find their days filled with meetings and their nights and weekends filled with events they need to attend to support the faculty and to represent the institution.

• Take advantage of the perspective you had on community colleges when you worked at the four-year level to build better relationships with the four-year institutions in your current district.
• If you oversee occupational areas, some of your closest allies and supporters will be industry employees; cultivate them.

• Research specialized funding sources for community colleges to use in faculty development initiatives.

• As you would at a four-year institution, seek out opportunities for your own professional development and pursuit of scholarly interests.

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