At Project CLUE, a study of undergraduate curriculum leadership based at the University of Michigan, we have been interviewing chairpersons and faculty members from departments nominated by academic vice presidents as especially attentive to curriculum planning (see The Department Chair, summer 1999, pp. 8–9). We interviewed 11 chairpersons from community colleges, 17 from master’s universities, and 16 from doctoral or research universities. They lead departments from disciplines as diverse as humanities, bioengineering, nursing, and psychology. After exploring perceptions of their curriculum leadership role in some depth, we asked each of the 44 department chairs, “What role do you think your dean expects you to play?” We found the answers to this question startling, and so we conducted a more detailed analysis of what the chairs said and how they elaborated on their initial answers.

Using a computerized qualitative analysis program, we coded 28 different topics mentioned by the chairpersons as they struggled to answer this question. As we examined the 60 different passages coded by the 28 topics, six general themes emerged showing how the chairpersons view their deans’ expectations:

1) No idea of the dean’s expectations.
2) Assume approval from the dean.
3) Provide managerial coordination.
4) Assist the dean with accountability.
5) Ensure responsiveness to student needs.
6) Provide leadership for an appropriate curriculum.

As we describe these themes, we use brief composite quotations intended to summarize and characterize the various types of answers given. The longer quotations attributed to a chair for a specific discipline and type of institution are verbatim.
EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE GOING OKAY

No idea of the dean’s expectations.
We were at first surprised by the chairs’ answers because a substantial number of them (eight of the 44) began their answers with a statement like, “I haven’t the slightest idea!” or “We’ve never discussed it,” and in one case, “I don’t think he cares.” Many who spoke like this indicated that this was a novel question to them. They seemed surprised that the dean might have any expectations at all. One chair said, “Interesting question. I mean, the dean’s never asked me to do it any differently” (chair, mathematics and computer science, master’s university).

Assume approval from the dean.
Others (nine of the 44) indicated in more positive but more subtle ways that the topic was seldom or never discussed. They made statements such as, “Well, she (or he) seems to like what we’re doing” or “She expects me to get the job done, and I guess I would hear about if it weren’t happening” and “I don’t know what would happen if I didn’t [show concern about the curriculum].” One chairperson said, “I don’t think they make their expectations clear, so I have no idea what they expect of me. I think they’re very happy with what I’ve been doing, but I have no idea what they expect. They have never let me know” (chair, communications, doctoral university).

Several individuals went on to clarify that the dean would definitely not be involved in or interested in the specific curriculum of their departments. Therefore, as one expressed it, “he gives me carte blanche.” Only one chairperson out of 44 actually described sitting down with the dean to talk about expectations for curriculum planning and leadership. In lieu of such talks, some chairs seemed to believe that the dean was satisfied with their performance (and that of their department) because they (or the department) had received rewards and approbation. Several said that the dean had indicated approval through strong financial support for curriculum projects and with public forms of approval, including nominating the department as an especially effective one in curriculum planning for the CLUE study. Others implied that if the system were broken the dean probably would have taken steps to fix it—so they assumed it was not broken.

Further Elaboration: Even if they initially expressed a lack of explicit knowledge of the dean’s views, most chairs went on to elaborate on some suppositions or speculations. These statements often expressed more than one idea, and they attributed a variety of opinions to the deans. It seemed to us that
these attributed opinions (which encompass the remaining four themes) can be arranged on a continuum, from a view that the dean primarily is interested in a smoothly running operation, to a more proactive view that implies a strong concern for the educational process and for students in particular.

**Provide managerial coordination.**

At one end of the continuum, some chairs expressed the view that the dean did not want to be involved in curriculum matters but expected the chair to take care of them in an orderly manner, ensuring that the teaching program was organized smoothly and thus keeping problems off his/her desk (ten mentions). They mentioned such responsibilities as distributing the workload among faculty, being sure teaching is taking place, and hiring good people. “Being a good manager” was the theme here.

**Assist the dean with accountability.**

Another theme involved deans’ expectations that chairpersons serve a broader institutional cause in helping provide accountability to various constituencies (six mentions). This view is conveyed by the paraphrased statement, “We are supposed to be consultants to help him do his job better.” Several constituencies were mentioned. For example, the chair is supposed to help ensure “that we will do well in accreditation and on national (or state) examinations in our field,” “that we comply with state transfer guidelines,” and “that the legislature and the chancellor are not unhappy.” In each of these cases, the chairs’ speculations reflected their awareness that the responsibility and purview of the dean was broader than their own, and that accountability is a key concern for upper-level administrators. As one chair said, “I think he’s much more interested in who’s teaching what [and why graduate students are teaching instead of faculty], what the legislature thinks, what the chancellor thinks, and where the faculty are if they’re not teaching” (chair, sociology, research university).

**Ensure responsiveness to student needs.**

Responsiveness to students as a specific constituency seemed to us to represent a speculated concern of the dean that is more closely related to the educational program. Several chairs (six mentions) speculated that the dean expects them to manage things “so that student satisfaction is high,” “so that students will be able to compete in the job market,” “so that we will be able to attract students,” or “so that student demands are met.” One chairperson said, “I think basically the dean is interested in a
reasonable level of student satisfaction and doesn’t get involved in other details with regard to the curriculum” (chair, microbiology, research university).

**Provide leadership for an appropriate curriculum.**

Several chairs (eight mentions) stated that the dean wanted the chair to ensure that the curriculum was “appropriate,” “current,” or “forward-looking.” They emphasized that the dean was not especially interested in, or knowledgeable about, how to define such currency or appropriateness in their fields. Rather, they felt it was a task the dean expected of them and assumed they would perform competently. One chair expressed it this way: “Well, she expects us to basically do what we’ve been doing in the past to assure her that we offer quality courses that meet the needs of students and also look to the future for new needs” (chair, biology, community college).

**ARE THINGS REALLY OKAY?**

Despite the chairpersons’ ability to speculate on what concerned their deans, we remain struck by the idea that so few of them had ever had an actual discussion with their immediate superior about their primary tasks and, in particular, about curriculum leadership. In most other enterprises, agreements and expectations for leadership would not only be made explicit at the time the unit leader assumed the position, but would form a substantial part of discussions at annual evaluation time. Only one chairperson mentioned their own annual evaluation and said curriculum leadership was a topic discussed then. In contrast, our interviewees emphasized that the dean expects they will get the job done, that they don’t care how, and don’t follow up to be sure it is. In short, as long as no problems land on the dean’s desk, the chairperson is assumed to be doing the job well.

Perhaps the dean is not really a supervisor of the chairperson. In academe, some would see a collegial relationship rather than a supervisory one as entirely appropriate. In fact, the methods of appointment and length of tenure of chairpersons participating in our study varied widely. Not all of the chairpersons in our sample serve at the pleasure of the dean. Many of them (36 percent in the community colleges and 45 percent in the four-year institutions) were, instead, directly elected by their departmental colleagues and only nominally appointed by the dean. In most of the remaining institutions in our sample, faculty members have a strong say in who is selected as chair, even when an external search is conducted and the chairperson is appointed. In a number of cases, the chairperson’s position rotated (or at least was reviewed) every few years, but one chair we interviewed had held the role for 38 years. This
person undoubtedly had experienced different expectations from many deans during his lengthy career and may have had little guidance from any of them.

It would be fair to say that most chairpersons we interviewed were clear about the expectations the faculty in their departments had for their leadership role. Many said that their tenure in office depended on whether they were perceived to meet faculty expectations. Yet as a group, they seem not to benefit from clarity about the expectations of their immediate supervisors and the ways their own roles link to the demands for institutional excellence and responsiveness. In these interviews, the chairpersons mentioned to us that pressure for accountability is increasing and that they are expected to help college administrators respond to these pressures. Things may not be quite okay in curriculum leadership if the dean is silent about the chair’s role and the chair doesn’t take initiative to ask. Chairs may need to assume the responsibility of raising the issue of what the dean expects so that the two leaders can work collaboratively in the best interest of curriculum appraisal and improvement. Such collaboration holds promise for improving the department’s credibility and financial support by keeping the dean informed, and can benefit the institution as it tries to best serve students well and demonstrate accountability.

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