Working Within the Organizational Structure of Community Colleges is the second 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 general advice, communicating with the student body, and colleague relations.

When we moved into community college administration, each of us realized early on that in contrast to the hierarchical organization of four-year colleges and universities, organizational structure in community colleges tends to be relatively flat. Some community colleges, including our institution (College of DuPage), do not have department chairs in the tradition of the four-year universities. Instead, faculty report directly to an associate dean, dean, director, or coordinator. Because of this structure, many administrators who do not oversee faculty are placed on the same organizational level as a dean who oversees many faculty, and both a dean and a director may report directly to a vice president. Some variation to this structure may exist at multi-campus community colleges, where a central administrative office oversees the system and provides a hierarchy, but at the campus level, communication flows as much horizontally as it does vertically.

In the following paragraphs, we will discuss in more detail what we have learned about community college faculty, and how best to communicate with them within a college’s organizational structure. Before doing so, however, it’s important to look at how organizational structure affects administrators’ relationship with the institution’s overall leadership: Vice presidents and other cabinet members report to the president who, in turn, reports to the board of trustees, whose members are typically elected or appointed individuals from the district. Many decisions an administrator makes are often only recommendations to the board—in particular, decisions about personnel and program development. At some community colleges, board members may even be involved in routine decisions and participate in college-sponsored activities. While this close involvement has many positive aspects, including heightened two-way communication between upper management and faculty, excessive access to the board can result in mixed messages and confused priorities. Mastering this communication dynamic is both a challenge and the key to success for administrators.
WORKING WITH FACULTY

At both universities and two-year colleges, faculty and administration must communicate effectively. Every administrator must strive to know the faculty and their interests and challenges. One major challenge for faculty at two-year institutions is juggling the workload—approximately 30 to 35 semester credits a year. In transfer areas (classes that four-year institutions accept for transfer credit), faculty may teach anywhere from 100 to 175 students a semester. Also, while the notion of faculty ownership of the curriculum is common to both two-year and four-year institutions, in reality, community college faculty may discover their ownership of the curriculum to be an illusion because of mandated learning sequences. In addition, articulation agreements with four-year universities often drive the shape of the two-year curriculum, especially in transfer areas. Consequently, faculty may become frustrated because they can’t develop and teach higher-level courses in their field. Frustrations over the lack of autonomy can lead to burnout and a feeling of dissociation from both the discipline and the field as a whole. This dissociation may, in turn, affect the curriculum. Instead of a cohesive program with a well-articulated theoretical or philosophical grounding, the curriculum may become merely a collection of courses.

On the other hand, as specialized journals for community colleges reveal, many community college faculty have pioneered innovative and effective assignments and teaching strategies. Administrators need to support this creative spirit by advocating for faculty development funds to motivate faculty, conducting planning and evaluation sessions to help faculty prioritize their development needs, and providing opportunities to teach special topics courses or varied student populations (including by nontraditional modes of delivery). Administrators also can assist faculty by bringing in other faculty development facilitators, offering special teaching workshops, compiling exemplary teaching resources, and publicly recognizing faculty for teaching excellence. And administrators can help make assessment and program reviews (increasing features of academic life) positive experiences by encouraging faculty to talk about common learning objectives and continuous improvement of their programs. Finally, administrators can support faculty-driven projects, such as a compilation of the best student writing across the disciplines or an annual student art showcase, just a couple examples of projects that have enjoyed success at College of DuPage. These events raise the morale of both students and faculty and heighten the appreciation of teaching and learning at a community college.

Faculty in the occupational programs are also key. Occupational faculty are closely tied to industry and are often refreshingly entrepreneurial, hands-on teachers who are, generally speaking, committed to their two-year programs and to student completion. Having worked in the “real world,” many occupational faculty appreciate the opportunity to be teaching in an academic setting, and they understand that employment matters and a graduate’s starting salary reflects on the quality of teaching and learning in their
own classrooms. New administrators will find themselves attending faculty-facilitated advisory board meetings, visiting local business partners, and participating in faculty-driven student showcase events.

**OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND**

In our experience, working within the flat organizational structure has required us to stretch our mental frameworks, and in the process, we have gained freer communication and opportunities to support curricular and pedagogical creativity.

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

The five authors of this series work in College of DuPage’s Liberal Arts Division. Alain Hentschel is associate dean of Fine & Applied Arts, Daniel Lloyd is associate dean of Humanities, Sheryl Mylan is associate dean of Communications, Beverly Reed is assistant dean of Communications, and Wendolyn Tetlow is dean of Liberal Arts.