Many institutions could do a better job of intentionally cultivating academic and administrative leadership from within, where deep cultural knowledge of the institution and its many constituents, as well as understanding of its most closely held values, ambitions, and strategic goals, already resides.

To grow talent internally requires the full support and participation of faculty, staff, senior leadership, and the board. And the rewards can be great: new perspectives and energy, added capacity, and a renewed commitment to shared governance.

Failed presidential or other senior leadership appointments are serious and can be expensive and public. Further, they can erode confidence in the institution’s governance and in the board’s decision-making abilities, upping the ante for all concerned.

THE STORIES ARE LEGION. INSTITUTIONAL PROGRESS IS slowed or halted when a presidential or provost appointment does not succeed or a dean turns out to be a cultural mismatch with a school or college within the university, negatively impacting faculty morale, accreditation, fundraising, and much more. The consequences of success or failure of these appointments for the institution are serious and can be expensive and public. Further, they can erode confidence in the institution’s governance and in the board’s decision-making abilities, upping the ante for all concerned.
Hiring effective administrative talent in higher education is essential work for presidents and other members of the senior leadership team. The normal course of action is to conduct a national search for these positions, sometimes with the assistance of a search firm. But 10 years ago, it occurred to me that many young, tenured faculty members at my institution at the associate professor level showed great promise for institutional leadership. Having long believed that we in higher education could do a better job of intentionally cultivating academic and administrative leadership, I created the Faculty Administrative Fellows program at Elon University.

The concept is simple: Fellows join my senior staff for a two-year, 12-month appointment to participate in all aspects of senior-level administrative deliberations and decision making and take on a demanding project of institutional significance. On top of these responsibilities, fellows teach a reduced load and continue their scholarly pursuits. We strongly encourage fellows to come into the program with a plan to maintain progress towards promotion to full professor; all who have subsequently applied for promotion have been successful. The implementation of the program has had minimal budget impact, with the gains far outweighing the costs.

Fellows participate in the day-to-day work of the senior leadership team, from the routine (how can the first-year student move-in experience be improved for next year?) to managing crises (such as responding to an incident of racial bias on campus) to long-range strategic planning for the university. They have significant interactions with university trustees, attending meetings and retreats and working on ad hoc committees and projects; develop deep relationships with vice presidents and other senior staff from across the university; and take on the visible role of a senior staff member.

Testing Their Skills

The institutional projects that fellows take on test their organizational and leadership skills, as well as their ability to lead important works with a high degree of independence and deliver results. They must conceive of a set of conceptual, strategic goals, and yet understand that the small details of implementation will speak volumes about the quality of their initiative.

Past fellows’ projects have included working with the executive vice president and the vice-chair of the board of trustees in leading an all-university strategic planning process; assisting with the establishment of a new school of law; building a college access and success program (the Elon Academy) from the ground up; and taking on the difficult and complex work of coordinating, integrating, and strengthening the institution’s many efforts related to global engagement and inclusion. Another fellow took a more scholarly approach, studying which aspects of the undergraduate experience were most transformative for students, leading to the publication of a book.

Each project took advantage of the fellows’ natural skill sets and passions but required that they develop additional

Several participants in the Faculty Administrative Fellows program collaborated on a reflection of their experience.

Elon’s Faculty Administrative Fellows program was an amazing opportunity for us. From the outset, the senior administrative team (or senior staff, at Elon) made it clear that fellows were understood to be full, working members of the team. Each of us was charged with a large, ambitious, and not-yet-fully-formed project, just as all of the other members of senior staff were engaged in managing major institutional units. Throughout, senior staff members and past faculty administrative fellows served as mentors on these complex projects, as well as for the transitions to administrative work.

Moving from a faculty role into an administrative position involves a significant learning curve. Being a member of the senior staff requires becoming knowledgeable about areas of the university that are essential to its functioning but have been less visible to faculty members. Certainly, some senior staff work is familiar to the faculty, such as governance and academic affairs. However, each fellow was also thrown into senior-level discussions on a variety of topics, including fundraising campaigns, human resources, issues related to the governing board and councils, finance, and long-range planning. The faculty administrative fellow role meant thinking and learning beyond our disciplinary training.
as well as partnering with units beyond academics.

Fellows have an opportunity to develop and extend their skills, leadership and otherwise. Prior to serving in the president’s office, each of us was an experienced decision maker on the campus, chairing academic departments, the faculty governing body, university-wide committees, and presidential task forces. Working directly with and learning from senior administrators provided opportunities to observe and hone our leadership skills. We became partners in navigating unfamiliar levels of complexity across a broader range of academic programs, constituencies, and viewpoints than our faculty roles typically afford. Assuming the lead on major, complex university projects created an immediate, concrete context within which we could improve our leadership skills as well as other advanced administrative skills, such as budgeting, planning, navigating organizational structures, and team-building—skills that will transfer to our next positions, on campus or off.

Each of us looks back and sees this experience as one that involved significant change in professional identity. Fellows have been tenured, associate professors (with one exception at the tenured, full professor level) who are recognized as exceptional teachers and scholars. Stepping into the fellow role moved us away from our familiar academic role, resulting in a transitional sense of identity, which could be challenging. Loneliness, isolation, loss of autonomy, and changes to professional identity and relationships were commonly expressed experiences from faculty members moving into full-time administrative roles. At the same time, these roles can result in an enhanced sense of one’s power to effect real change, to see student learning outcomes holistically, to aid the university’s progress, and to lead others to realize their own greater potential.

The fellow role is designed in a way that can ease the transition, while retaining the rewarding nature of this new work. Fellows entered an in-between space that was not entirely administrative and not entirely academic. Fellows remained engaged, committed teachers and scholars, with exceptional university service responsibilities. We maintained our status as teaching faculty and retained eligibility for promotion from associate to full professor (except the one fellow who entered as a full professor), with all of the expectations that come with that. Still, serving in this in-between role meant cultivating a different understanding of our professional identity. Some colleagues have viewed us as either faculty in an administrative world or administrators in an academic world. The truth is, the fellow position enabled us to negotiate and lead effectively in both worlds.

The fellow role offered insight into and experience with the complexity of decisions and decision-making processes that were otherwise almost exclusively beyond a faculty member’s experience. At most universities, faculty members see the results of the senior staff’s work but not the means through which campus-wide decisions are made. Participating in trustee meetings—such as the annual budget teleconference, for instance—demystified that complex, developmental, and non-linear process. We witnessed firsthand when administrators made mistakes, disagreed, had ideas both good and bad, and took the necessary time to arrive at the best decision.

The Faculty Administrative Fellows program is an additional component of shared governance. It brings the faculty teaching experience directly to the senior leadership team, and then in the opposite but complementary direction, it brings university-wide perspectives into the realms of teaching faculty. Fellows must move forward with a foot in each world, a task that carries unique but immensely rewarding challenges. But because it is a partnership—designed by university administrators and walked by faculty fellows—is precisely one of the reasons for the success of the program.
Senior leadership teams are refreshed by the dynamics of new ideas and challenges to established ways of thinking and doing. They have gained more knowledge and institution-wide experience and perspective.

What Are the Benefits?
I believe the presence of faculty administrative fellows on an administrative team encourages senior team members to be more reflective, to pause in the midst of decision making, and to reexamine some fundamentals in the process of providing context and background to a relatively new colleague. These pauses may slow us down a bit, but in a constructive, thoughtful way. Fellows draw out vice presidents’ mentoring capacities with questions about endowments, board bylaws, or potential faculty concerns, and such conversations have influenced our work, in and out of meetings.

Fellows also bring a unique point of view to the table. They understand university culture, having lived in it for years, but their vantage point complements mine and helps me understand my institution better. Fellows are active in the classroom, well connected to students and faculty and staff colleagues, and introduce novel insights into every conversation. They have brought diversity to my team: Five of the seven fellows so far are women and two are African American, and there has sometimes (but not always) been a generation of age difference between fellows and the older members of my team. Senior leadership teams are refreshed by the dynamics of new ideas and challenges to established ways of thinking and doing.

Of course, faculty administrative fellows bring additional capacity to the table and have helped launch important new projects and initiatives quickly and well. Collectively, they have added administrative depth to the university while preparing for senior leadership work.

The Elon Board of Trustees asks regularly about succession planning and administrative backup should a vice-president or I unexpectedly leave or become incapacitated. Two former fellows have been successful candidates in internal searches for associate provost positions, both bringing important university-wide experience to their newly earned roles in academic affairs administration. Either could step into an interim provost role, and the university would be in extremely capable hands. Two other former fellows have taken on interim leadership roles on campus, proving themselves enormously competent in the breach as we consider how to best advance a successful search process.

I would not want readers to conclude that I am in any way suggesting that administrative talent should only be cultivated from within the institution. At Elon, in tandem with the contributions of the faculty administrative fellows, we have selected critical senior leaders from talented external hires who have provided valued and distinct experiences, talents, and expertise. But especially when a stable, experienced administrative team is in place, colleges and universities have the rewarding opportunity to cultivate administrative leadership among existing campus faculty members who already possess deep cultural knowledge of the institution and its many constituents, as well as an understanding of its most closely held values, ambitions, and strategic goals.

In addition to sending an important message about advancement opportunities within the institution, leaders developed from within can energize and renew a presidential cabinet and convey to the broader campus that fresh vision and viewpoints, as well as shared governance, are welcomed at senior decision-making levels.

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**AUTHOR:** Leo M. Lambert is the president of Elon University.

**T'SHIP LINKS:** Derek Bok, “The Trouble with Shared Governance.” September/October 2010.