

Assignment 2: Informal Interviews

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I conducted administrator interviews by email. I requested responses from five administrators and received responses from four: Dr. Corley Dennison, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Undergraduate Studies; Dr. Frances Hensley, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Undergraduate Studies (retired); Dr. Tammy Johnson, Executive Director of Admissions and International Student Services; and Dr. Rudy Pauley, Vice President for Outreach and Continuing Studies (retired).

The common response from all administrators was that nothing fully prepares you for everything you will encounter as administrator. Dr. Dennison noted that leadership programs "...get you thinking critically about administration..." and encourage you to adapt the mindset that "I'm going to be an administrator." Dr. Pauley stated that "...one has to learn to mix your 'educational experience' with common sense and basic managerial skills." All administrators added that previous work experience ("working up through the ranks") was an important factor in their preparation. Dr. Hensley specifically noted that her experiences as a faculty member and faculty governance were essential to administrative relationships with faculty.

Dr. Johnson noted that certain courses were particularly useful in her role. She specifically mentioned history of higher education, law, statistics, and finance. Dr. Dennison stated that education law and personnel law were particularly useful. Dr. Pauley expressed the importance of higher education finance. He said he was "...charged with designing a budget for a mid-sized university and then were asked to figure in a 5% and 15% reduction...Who knew that this would be par for the course in later years?" Dr. Johnson noted that reviewing a budget and answering questions was not helpful, but "constructing a budget on a set of parameters is very useful."

In response to a question regarding irrelevant experiences, most administrators stated that there is always some usefulness in a course or activity. While some may seem impractical at a particular moment, you still gain from "...reading complex theories and forcing you to think from the abstract to the practical" and "getting you to think critically about administration." The importance is in the broader, combination of experiences which lead to "...a comprehensive understanding of the enterprise," noted Dr. Hensley. Dr. Pauley specifically stated that he could not think a single wasted course. He continued, "I often found myself faced with 'interesting' situations and would remember that somewhere in my program we had talked about such situations."

Dr. Pauley suggested that the curriculum could be enhanced by including more emphasis on budgeting and people skills. Dr. Johnson also listed budgeting as a critical topic. Dr. Hensley specifically recommended study in conflict management and facilitating group activities. She also suggested internships in areas other than the student's work experience.

In terms of advice to future administrators, Dr. Dennison suggested that students should watch the administrators above them and analyze how they handle situations. Seek out a mentor and ask questions and analyze how he or she succeeds. Dr. Hensley stressed the importance of gaining the "...broadest understanding of higher education you can." Dr. Johnson reiterated that it is impossible to anticipate your exact needs as an administrator, but "...you should have a set of guiding principles or standards within which to operate...as long as you consistently apply those standards, you'll usually make the 'right' decision." Dr. Pauley advised that one should keep grounded. You will make mistakes and you will be overwhelmed, but "...maintain a sense of humor...always remember where you come from and when making decisions put yourself in the place of the other side of the situation."

Personal Note: After reviewing these responses, I reflected on the structure of the cohort curriculum. The specific courses that were suggested as the most useful (higher education finance, history, and law) have been eliminated from the leadership program in the cohort structure. While the logistics of the cohort made it possible for me to study in this program, I am somewhat concerned that I have missed essential elements that I will need in the future. Perhaps this is something that might be considered before another cohort begins study. If funding is available for faculty, it might be possible to have concurrent higher and public education law, finance, and history courses and maintain the valuable logistical structure of the cohort.