

“But We’ve Got No Power”: The Leadership Role of the Program Director

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INTRODUCTION

Academia provides a somewhat unique context for leadership roles. Oftentimes, academics are promoted into leadership positions on the basis of their academic expertise rather than their leadership expertise. Subsequently, academic leaders oftentimes feel the pressure of occupying a position of leadership and responsibility without the knowledge and skills specific to leadership. Lack of leadership skills aside, academic leaders also face pressures emanating from a sector facing ‘difficult’ times. Institutional leaders at all levels of higher education institutions must grapple with the forces bearing down on higher education: globalization, competitive environments, fickle economies, emerging technologies and great diversity in ever-expanding student cohorts. Most tertiary institutions have an agenda for expansion and attracting higher numbers of students in order to insure their survival in these uncertain times. There is ever-growing emphasis in strategic plans on attracting greater student numbers, the quality of learning and teaching, and the necessity of equipping graduates with lifelong learning skills. In such an environment, the necessity of academic leadership has become obvious and there is a mounting emphasis on academic leadership roles within the higher education scene. For example, Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008) in a report funded by Australia’s ALTC for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education focuses on academic leadership capabilities “in times of change”. In the report the pressures facing higher education are clearly articulated, and a strong argument is made that responding to these pressures necessitates change, which in turn necessitates effective leadership:

To remain viable, universities must build their capacity to respond promptly, positively and wisely to this interlaced combination of change forces...but change does not just happen but must be led. (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008, pp vi-vii)

Universities are therefore expending a great deal of energy to try and address pressing issues such as student recruitment, retention, employability and success. Conceivably, in the face of competition and economic challenges, the survival of the respective faculty or department hinges on the success of the programs offered. Given that program directors are primarily responsible for the curriculum design, quality and co-ordination of the degree programs into which students ultimately enrol, program directors (sometimes referred to as program leaders, discipline co-ordinators among other titles) are academic leaders very close to “the coal-face” of such issues. Program directors are being charged with a share of the institutional burden of addressing the issues student recruitment, retention and student success within their programs. Thus, institutions are recognizing the critical role program directors play within the organization, and there is some evidence that the importance of developing leadership capital in

program directors is also being recognized. A quick Google search with keywords “academic program director leadership” highlights a number of results that mention specifically program directors. The resulting searches include titles such as:

- “Academic Leadership Development Program (ALD)” – Tufts University;
- “Academic Leadership development program (ALDP)” – University of British Colombia;
- “Program directors’ leadership” – George Washington University.

It is quite evident from such search results that institutions are now making some investment in building academic leadership capacities for program directors.

However, despite the growing recognition of the importance of program directors, the formal literature surrounding academic leadership specifically for program directors remains sparse. Some literature exists on academic leadership in higher education (though not as much as exists in the primary and secondary education sectors) in general but “very little research focuses on the APD [academic program director], even though program directors have a significant role to play in learning and teaching outcomes for students, program quality and the reputation of the institution within which they work (Vilkinas & Ladyshevsky, 2012, p. 110). Thus, an aim of the present chapter is raise awareness of, and stimulate discussion around leadership and program directors. The roles and challenges faced by academic program directors are firstly discussed, pertinent leadership frameworks are identified and, some recommendations for program director leadership enactment and development of leadership competencies are made.

THE PROGRAM DIRECTOR ROLE

Program Directors play a key leadership role in ensuring that programs of study are coherent in design, planning, management, and delivery. They provide support for teaching teams; encourage the development and maintenance of relevant quality teaching resources; encourage evaluation approaches including peer review of teaching; and regularly review and evaluate program performance. (Griffith University, n.d. para 1)

The above role description of the program director found on the author’s home institution’s website, identifies the key curriculum responsibilities of the program director. In addition to the curriculum leadership responsibilities mentioned in the above extract, the program director role also involves dealing with student related issues such as academic advice, study pathways, credit assessments and so on. Having recently attended a program directors professional learning series of workshops, the author frequently heard, from colleagues, “...but we’ve got no power”. Such comments serve to highlight that a unique characteristic of program director’s leadership role is an absence of a formal leader-follower relationships; program directors lead by example rather than by ‘clout’ (Milburn, 2010). Quite often the program director role is assumed in addition to the usual teaching responsibilities of individual courses and thus the program director is in a participatory, rather than management, relationship with colleagues. With little or no authority, the program director must lead through influence and example.

As noted in literature, and as observed within the author’s home institution, more often than not, program directors do not apply for or “ask for the job”, but rather, are asked to take on the role as an extension to their usual course teaching responsibilities (Milburn, 2010), usually on the basis of their competency and academic accomplishment (Yielder & Coding, 2004). Consequently, program directors

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