

Transitioning From Department Chair to Medical School Dean

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Exploring the Roles and Responsibilities of Deans

Dr. Rita Grooms has served as Chair of the Department of Medicine for the past eight years. Under her leadership the departmental faculty have grown by 30% to over 150 members, the research programs from 7 million to 25 million dollars in federal grants, and clinical programs increased with the opening of three new community clinics and a variety of new specialized clinical services. She has recruited five new division chiefs, two center directors, a departmental administrator and a new residency program director. The residency program is thriving with 10 strong applicants for each of the department's positions, new fellowship programs have been introduced in two divisions, and more medical students matched in internal medicine than any time in the previous 10 years.

In recognition of her leadership potential, Dr. Grooms' Dean supports her application to the [AAMC Council of Deans Fellowship](#). She is accepted to the program and is pleased to match with a mentor that balances personal and professional life well and is accomplished in both education and clinical research. Her fellowship project examines the systems that medical school deans use to maintain a sense of balance in their busy lives. About halfway through the year of her fellowship, Dr. Grooms is invited to submit her curriculum vitae for consideration as a Dean at a prestigious private medical school. She does so; she then is invited for an interview with a search committee and following that, a visit to the school. As she prepares for the school visit and a long list of interviews with various institutional representatives, she realizes that it is time to be absolutely certain that she is ready and willing to take on the Dean's role. She contacts one of her long time mentors for a discussion.

Dr. Theo Martin was her first mentor in the clinical lab during her fellowship. They were co-authors on her first published paper, and have maintained a strong relationship over the years of her academic career. Even though they live across the country from each other, he has always been available for a telephone call. She places the call and is pleased to hear his voice.

“Hello, Rita. How's the family?”

“Terrific, Ted. Kids are in college and doing well; my husband is thinking about writing a book.”

“And you, Rita, how are you?”

“Terrific. Excited. Anxious. I am interviewing for a medical school Deanship next Tuesday.”

“No kidding! Good for you, Rita!”

“I think so, Theo. But I could use some advice. How do I know if I am ready? If I accept, how do I prepare to do well? I wouldn't consider moving if I couldn't do well, you know.”

How do I know if I'm ready?

Theo answers, “I know. So let's think about what you would be doing. What would it take for you to see yourself in each of the following situations?”

- Greeting new students and their parents, knowing that on graduation their medical school debt may be thrice your first mortgage;

- Presenting the medical school's strategic plan to the Medical Center Board that ousted the last Dean for being "too ivory tower;"
- Meeting with the Council of Chairs who are anxious that you did not negotiate strenuously enough for resources for their departments;
- Having a conversation with an alumnus whose son was not accepted to the medical school class;
- Confronting an ineffective department chair who should be relieved of his position;
- Approaching a wealthy donor to endow a research building in honor of her deceased parents.

Rita responds with a deep sigh and a smile. "Of course I've done some similar tasks as Department Chair, and I've learned about other examples through my COD mentor. I think I could meet these challenges and be successful in the right environment with the right resources. My COD mentor is very pleased to hear of the invitation and enthusiastic about the prospect of me joining the count of Medical School Deans. He has reminded me, though, that the job of Dean is in many ways quite different from that of Chair. I want to make sure I can make a positive difference for this school. How do I know if I can be successful?"

Advice from a trusted mentor

"Have you had a chance to read Clawson and Wilson's book, [The Medical School Dean?](#) These former deans describe a variety of characteristics of successful Deans. You have them all: honesty, integrity, fairness, ability to communicate, political skills, cheerfulness, sense of humor, and ability to delegate. I'm sure that's why your mentor is so enthusiastic about you as a Dean prospect. Of course there's more to the job than personal qualities. To be a successful Dean, you must build an effective team drawing from a much broader range of people outside your discipline. You also have to secure the necessary resources, not just in money (though that's hard enough) but authority and support from hospital leadership, clinical leadership, and the University.

To accomplish these things takes more than talent, energy, personality, and administrative skills; it takes leadership."

"Of all that I have read about leadership, one concept has been the most useful to me... **'the leader is the custodian of the shared vision.'** To be an effective leader, you must first discern a vision for the institution that can be embraced across key diverse constituencies. Recognize that for a Medical School Dean the needed resources will vary substantially in kind depending on the constituency, including investments by the Hospital Director, authority delegated by the University Chancellor, endowments committed by the alumni, support provided by the Department Chairs, openness to change offered by the faculty, and patience with process extended you by the students. You must effectively communicate your vision, helping others see how it can unfold so you can secure the resources necessary to achieve it."

"Listen to the faculty, staff, and students you meet during your interview. They will help you discern the vision that can serve them and their institution well. Of course, listen to the institutional authorities and to the opinion leaders, identifying not just the opportunities but the problem areas too. Make sure your plans **address practical strategies for solving key issues** in a timely way. For your vision to be successful other institutional leaders will have to find it both compelling and realistic. Consider each of the scenarios we just discussed and build a vision and a strategy to meet the needs of the community to which you are being

recruited. Remember also that you should plan how your first one hundred days will unfold. As you imagine your vision and strategy, make sure you have identified the key first steps that will define you, your values, and your Deanship. Consider how you would develop that approach, beginning now, with the initial interviews.”

“Keep me posted. Call when you feel the need. And Good Luck! The school that wins you over will be very fortunate.”

How might you prepare for this senior leadership interview?

How would you build a vision?

- How would you prepare a vision statement that matches your personal style and passions to your institution?
- How can each of the contacts described for the medical school dean in this case support each other in a dynamic, productive medical school?

How would you translate the vision into actions and communications?

- During the recruitment process?
- During the negotiation for the position?
- In the time between acceptance of the contract and arrival?
- In the first six months of appointment?