

The Game of Life as an Academic Leader

Panel/Symposium / 75 Minutes

Abstract:

The decision to move into an academic leadership position can be a complicated one. This symposium aims to provide an opportunity for participants who are considering academic leadership, who may already be in administrative positions, or who are just curious about what these positions entail to discuss the benefits and challenges of those roles. Participants in this session will play *The Game of Life as an Academic Administrator*, a twist on the card game version of the classic board game, *Life*. The game will set the scene for a discussion on what life looks like in different paths of academic administration and how life can change.

Keywords: Academic Leadership, Academic Career Development, Academic Markets

Introduction

When in our doctoral programs, did any of us think to ourselves, “Maybe I should become an academic leader one day (chair/director, associate dean, provost, or president)?” Possibly, but this is unlikely the question we asked when early in our academic career. That said, many of us experience the push and pull of coming to a decision when presented with the opportunity to serve in an academic leadership capacity. Cortina (2019) reflected in his essay on academic career transitions and the ‘grass is always greener’ phrase that, “The grass only seems greener. Maybe it really is greener, and maybe not, but it is hard to tell for sure until you hop the fence. And by the time you find out that the verdure was illusory, the neighbor’s dog has got you by the ankle” (p. 315). It is quite possible the dog has bitten our respective ankles, especially for those of us who transition to academic leadership, but there are experiences along our path that reflect a positive, transformational experience. The opportunities to support faculty, staff, and students, and the chances to cultivate external relationships that can further advance the mission, are often the ‘why’ behind our decision to remain leaders and pursue advanced roles in higher education. Nevertheless, the changes from faculty to academic leader, whether we choose the path or it is somewhat determined through political pressure, will be significant (Hecht, 1999). As we will discuss in our interactive panel session, the impact on leaders’ personal lives also deserves careful consideration, as well as other factors.

Theoretical Foundation

Evans (2018) suggests that we are often pressured to demonstrate *professionalism* in our fields specifically with an emphasis on being a leader and good university citizen. We should not discount the normative pressures on junior and mid-career faculty to take on service leadership roles. For many of us, this was the start of our journey to administrative appointments.

From factors related to organizational fit and timing in one’s career to potential ambivalence given our love for being a teacher-scholar, along issues of relocation and alignment with or detraction from personal priorities, the decision to pursue to academic leadership roles is one of considerable consequence. Those who have pursued this path have accepted a degree of tolerance for putting out fires, herding cats, and juggling multiple balls. Whatever the metaphor, the understanding of the terrain differs from those in the seat and those observing from the outside. As many academic leaders often convey, the higher the rank and position in the hierarchy, the lonelier it gets. Therefore, the importance of developing a network of peers and mentors is critical to academic leadership success. From sharing mutual concerns to benchmarking how best to develop faculty or to foster innovation in the curriculum, a network of experienced leaders will make such positive difference in your experience.

Gallos and Bolman (2021) document the numerous, complex challenges facing academic leaders and the varying sources of competing pressures that often overwhelm the best of us. The stressors in higher education may contribute to cynicism (Soomro, Sariah, & Ahmad, 2022) and negative mental health consequences (Lorenz, 2013) even for the experienced leaders. This session will afford attendees an opportunity to reflect on the various paths to academic leadership and learn from those experienced with the various administrative roles in business schools.

Symposium/Panel Overview

The decision to move into an academic leadership position can be a complicated one. For some faculty, pursuing certain positions is part of a well-planned career path. For others, it may be the result of an unplanned opportunity. And still others may simply be interested in exploring what the different academic leadership positions involve. This symposium aims to provide an opportunity for participants who are considering academic leadership, who may already be in administrative positions, or who are just curious about what these positions entail to discuss the benefits and challenges of those roles. Session leaders will facilitate the discussion, incorporating their own and seeking others' experiences and perspectives on academic leadership roles. The discussion will be guided by a card game to facilitate active engagement.

Participants in this session will play *The Game of Life as an Academic Administrator*, a twist on the card game version of the classic board game, *Life*¹. The game will set the scene for a discussion on what life looks like in different paths of academic administration and how life can change. With each card played in the game, participants can consider their personal career goals and engage in questions about pathways and challenges of a possible career as an academic administrator. The rules of the game are outlined below.

The Game of Life as an Academic Administrator

This twist on the classic Game of Life will have you choosing your career path as an academic administrator in higher education. Choose cards in each category—Career, Family, Wealth, and Adventure, to create your own story.

Objective: Play cards onto the table to create your life story.

Set up and Play:

1. Separate the cards into piles by category (career, family, wealth, adventure).
2. Give each pile a good shuffle and put them face down on the table.
3. Take turns drawing 1 card at a time, until each participant has 4 cards, one from each pile.
4. Take turns playing the career card, face up, on the table to see what career your game of life has in store for you.
5. Continue playing cards one at a time to create your story.
6. Discuss how changes in life impact your life as an academic administrator (and vice versa), and the opportunities and challenges that are in store.

Session Description

The session will begin with introductions of the panelists, focusing on their various academic leadership roles for context. Participants will also introduce themselves, focusing on their interest in academic leadership and possible experience in different positions. Then, panelists will explain the rules of *The Game of Life as an Academic Administrator*, as outlined above, and divide participants into different groups to play.

¹ <https://www.ultraboardgames.com/the-game-of-life/adventures-game-rules.php>

For the majority of this session, participants will play the *Game of Life as an Academic Administrator*. Participants will draw cards in the areas of Career, Family, Wealth and Adventure. As they draw cards, the facilitators will guide discussion in the corresponding areas. For example, three career cards will be possible: *Dean*, *Associate Dean*, or *Department Chair*. Corresponding discussion topics will include the paths to academic leadership, how the roles differ, how life and perspectives change as an academic leader. Conversation will flow as guided by participants, who will be encouraged to engage as the game proceeds. Participants will then draw a family card where options may include *twins*, *your parents move in*, and *divorce*. These cards will spurn discussion about work-life balance and maintaining mental health. Participants will draw a wealth card with options such as *faculty have a vote of no confidence* and *you move to university president*. This will allow discussion about what success looks like and how to make the right choices based on personal goals. Finally, participants will draw an adventure card to wrap up the discussion around the types of adventure an academic administrator can expect.

The discussion will conclude with a group reflection and debrief based on the comments that emerged through the session. The goal of the session is to share perspectives on and address questions for faculty who may be considering a path in academic administration.

Career Cards	Related discussion questions/topics for discussion
Dean	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the different paths to academic leadership? What if you want to be a provost or president? Are there multiple paths? 2. What should I consider when making the decision to pursue a leadership role? What are the tradeoffs in doing so? 3. How does your life and perspectives change as an academic leader? 4. What unique challenges do academic leaders face in different positions?
Associate Dean	
Dept. Chair	
Family Cards	
Twins!	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the work-life balance challenges as an academic administrator? Are they different in different roles? 2. What tools can help maintain work-life balance? 3. How are stressors experienced differently in different roles? 4. How can you maintain your mental health and still be effective?
Your parents move in	
Divorce	
Wealth Cards	
You build a strong network of other academic leaders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the market like for academic leaders? What experience/skills do I need if I want to pursue these roles? 2. How do I develop a professional network that will benefit me in pursuing administrative roles? How do I best use that network?
You move to a private institution	
Your boss schedules your weekly meeting at 6pm every Friday	

You move on to University President	3. How does the institutional context (public/private, small/large, etc.) influence how you do your job and/or the skills you need? 4. How do the challenges faced as an academic leader differ from those you face in a faculty role? How do they differ across different administrative roles? 5. How not to say “no” to all requests and how to find paths to “yes” when faced with constraints? 6. What does success look like as a Chair/Director, Associate Dean, and Dean?
Faculty have a vote of no confidence	
Your partner loses their job	
Adventure Cards	
You move back into your faculty role	1. How do your life and perspectives change as an academic leader? 2. How do the challenges faced as an academic leader differ from those you face in a faculty role? How do they differ across different administrative roles? 3. What are the work-life balance challenges as an academic administrator? Are they different in different roles?
You take a two-month vacation in Europe	
You earn a Fulbright	

Session Timeline

- 10 minutes: Introduction of panelists and participants.
- 10 minutes: Introduction of game and game set up.
- 40 minutes: Play the game of life in small groups, with discussion in between each round.
- 15 minutes: Debrief with full group

References

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