The Interim Administrator – Pros and Cons

PANELISTS:

Dr. Elizabeth Wilcoxson, Interim Dean of Business, Math, and Technology, St. Louis Community College – Forest Park

Vincent Featherson, Dean of Allied Health and Natural Science, St. Louis Community College – Forest Park

Ame Mead-Roach, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, St. Louis Community College – Forest Park

*Dr. Elizabeth Wilcoxson earned her Ph.D. in History from Boston College. After teaching history for 25 years at Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill, MA, she moved into administration as an Assistant Dean. She retired in 2010 but agreed to return to academia in August 2011 as an Interim Dean at St. Louis Community College at Forest Park. She spent a year as Interim Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences and now serves as Interim Dean of Business, Math and Technology.*

Dean Wilcoxson’s Story:

I arrived in St. Louis in August 2011, just about a month after I first heard about the interim position. The agreement that I had made was that I would come for one semester and that I would not be a candidate for the permanent position. This meant that I anticipated a very short time frame in which to learn the ways of a new institution and to reassure a faculty that had been emotionally battered by my predecessor.

The 15 years spent in administration in Massachusetts meant that I arrived with a fairly complete skill set. The issues that confronted me almost immediately were all ones that I had dealt with before. I don’t think that anything I could have encountered would have surprised me. Therefore, from the beginning, I was able to address whatever came up with confidence. It also meant that I had some different angles from which to consider issues which had not been considered before. When I was stymied by the best approach to take, I had former colleagues back in MA whom I could contact for ideas.

There were also some significant challenges. St. Louis Community College is part of a district system, a structure that I had not encountered before. Policies on one campus did not always match those on another, and no one seemed to know exactly how some of the practices had arisen except that “it has always been done that way.” My questioning of why things had to be done that way may have rankled with some of my colleagues. And, everything was done with a myriad of complex paperwork that, even after 18 months, I still have not mastered. Many names and faces from other campuses and the central office remain a blur.
Because I have always maintained an open door policy, getting to know faculty did not prove to be much of a challenge. They were eager to talk and to share their hopes and dreams and their disappointments. It did not take long to learn their history which for many had been painful under the previous dean. Many felt that this individual had played favorites with the faculty. As an outsider, I did not know the factions and everyone began with me on an equal footing. As soon as they realized that I really did care about them and what they were doing, they began to trust me. I made a point of attending every art exhibit opening, musical event and theater performance that I possibly could. I participated in as many meetings as humanly possible. And, I walked the campus getting to know the spaces they inhabited which ranged from the theater to the art annex to the gym. Many people commented that no administrator that they could remember had come to their events or visited their territory. Because I was already familiar with many of the tasks in which they were engaged such as online teaching and working with the Achieving the Dream initiative, I was able to understand their needs and relate to their struggles. In fact, I was teaching online courses for the first year at the college, so they could relate to me as a colleague as well as a supervisor.

If there was a down side to this early and fast bonding, it was that faculty were reluctant to see me leave again just when they had come to trust me. Plans that we had worked on together in several of the areas may have felt like an unnecessary exercise since I wouldn’t be there to see them implemented. As I sat on the search committee for my replacement, I was perhaps more critical as I tried to assess whether each candidate could take up where I would leave off and be able to build on the morale that I had worked hard to establish.

Relating to colleagues was another challenge. When I first arrived, my two dean colleagues had, of course, much more experience at the college, and I frequently had to call on them for information about how things were done. However, I had the longer experience as an administrator, and having worked in a very different environment I fear that I often asked unsettling questions about entrenched practices. I know that sometimes it appeared that I did things more effectively than they which may have provoked some resentment. In any case, they did not go out of their way to help unless I asked.

Within a short time, those two deans had left, and for a time I served two divisions, splitting my time between two work areas with very different needs and cultures. During that time I got to know Vince Featherson who was also serving as an interim in the third division. We were a good pair. He knew the college, and I knew the job of a dean. This reciprocity led us to build a strong and collaborative relationship which still continues as is evidenced by our presence together on this program! And, after a few months, we welcomed Ame Mead-Roach to our team. I am happy to say that she fulfilled all of my hopes about what my replacement in Humanities and Social Sciences would bring to the college.
Vincent Featherson earned a Master of Education with emphasis in Adult Education from the University of Missouri – St. Louis. He served as a full-time faculty member in the radiologic technology program for 23 years while moving into administration. Vincent has served as the radiologic technology program’s clinical coordinator and director. He also served at the Health Technologies Department Chair before assuming the role of Interim Dean for the Allied Health and Natural Sciences in March 2012. After successfully going through an interview process that included external candidates, he was offered and accepted the position as Dean of Allied Health and Natural Sciences in December 2012 and in late January 2013, he was appointed the lead Dean of the District Nursing program at St. Louis Community College at Forest Park.

Dean Featherson’s Story:

I started working at St. Louis Community College (STLCC) – Forest Park in August 1989. This was not the first time that I stepped foot on this campus. I entered the Radiologic Technology program as a student in 1983. I graduated in 1985 and was immediately employed as a Radiologic Technologist at the hospital where I performed my clinical education. So needless to say, fast forward to 2013, I have a history with the college.

My path to becoming Dean of Allied Health and Natural Sciences was interesting. Throughout my tenure, adapting to change, particularly in administration was the norm. In my 23+ years at STLCC – FP there have been 5 presidents, 4 Vice Presidents of Academic Affairs, and 5 Deans of Allied Health and Natural Sciences. Stability was not a word that was used on this campus.

Interim Dean of Allied Health and Natural Sciences (AHNS)

I started the spring 2012 semester (early January) finalizing workloads in my area (Health Technologies) and reviewing Radiologic Technology program policies and procedures. In addition to this, I was preparing for the incoming Radiologic Technology class for the fall 2012 semester. The semester was uneventful until the late morning of February 29, 2012. After visiting students at a clinical site (hospital), I received a call from the Administrative Assistant for the VPAA. I was asked if I would be on campus that afternoon, I said I had not planned on being there but I could come if necessary. I was told the VPAA needed to meet.

I arrived on campus around 2:00 pm for my meeting. I was told during this meeting that the Dean of Allied Health and Natural Sciences would be working on special projects off campus for the remainder of the semester and would no longer be on campus. In addition to this, I was told that the Dean’s contract would not be renewed. I was asked to assume the role of Interim Dean for the division. I had many questions. One question that I did asked was what happen. I was told this was a personnel matter and could not be discussed. I told the VPAA that I needed time to think about the request and I would discuss this at our next meeting that was scheduled for the next day.
Being a part of this division afforded me a view of the challenges that anyone would face in this position. The morale of the division was very low. Some faculty and staff believed that the former Dean played favorites and had spies. There was an air of mistrust and insecurity in the division. This factored into whether or not I would accept the position. One big advantage that I had as an internal candidate was I’ve always had a good working relationship with many in the Allied Health and Natural Sciences Division and across the campus. People knew my standards were high for students and my expectations (being accountable) were clear to faculty and staff that I supervised as Chair and Program Director.

March 1, 2012 I had my second meeting with the VPAA. After a lengthy discussion, I agreed to step into the role as Interim Dean. The learning curve was taken to another level because there were many issues on the table that needed my attention. Knowing the internal workings of the division presented its challenges because there were many inconsistencies, not only in my division but also with the other two divisions. In addition to this many processes that I practiced in the past because “this is the way we’ve always done this” no longer could or would apply. I found out there were many inconsistencies because policies and procedures were not being followed. Being an Interim administrator, I did not want to come in a make any major changes because I did not know at the time I accepted the Interim position, I would apply for the permanent Dean’s position. After the announcement was made by the VPAA at an AHNS division meeting, I was pleased to see and hear offers of support from my colleagues.

Not having any experience as an Academic Dean was a concern. This concern quickly left once I started working with Dean Beth Wilcoxson. Here was a person with a wealth experience as an administrator and fresh eyes. She has been consistent and patient in her willingness to share and collaborate. This was and has been perfect for me.

Toward the end of the summer, I was informed by the VPAA that Ame Mead-Roach was offered and accepted the position of Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences. Our team in a short period of time has collaborated on things that lead to consistent procedures and practices that have been applied across each division. This was something that has been sorely missing. The working relationship that has been established by Dean Wilcoxson, Dean Mead-Roach and I played a role in my decision to apply for the Dean of Allied Health and Natural Sciences position.
Ame Mead-Roach earned a Master of Science in Educational Leadership from Capella University and is currently a doctoral candidate at Fielding Graduate University. She served as a Developmental Education faculty member for 8 years while moving into administration and online education. Ame served as Director of Distance Learning at Glen Oaks Community College in Centreville, MI and Director of Online Programs at Fontbonne University in St. Louis, MO before joining St. Louis Community College at Forest Park as Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences in July 2012.

Dean Mead-Roach’s Story:

I was thrilled to see the position of Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences posted at St. Louis Community College- Forest Park. I readied my materials, submitted them, and worried- as all applicants do! When I received the call for an interview, I was overjoyed. On the initial interview day, I sat at a large conference table with a fairly large hiring committee and listened while everyone introduced themselves and their roles. The second person to introduce herself was Dean Wilcoxson who introduced herself as the interim dean. I placed a sticky note in my brain to consider this after the interview.

Once the interview ended, I left and pondered my experience. I thought about Dean Wilcoxson. I had never worked at an institution that had hired an external interim, so I am embarrassed to admit, that I didn’t realize that she was not a Forest Park faculty member. I considered at length what Dean Wilcoxson would think about me coming in if I were hired. Would she be a friend or a foe? How would we work together after she had been in the role of Dean?

My new team: Joining a team that is not so permanent

Not long after my initial interview, I learned that the two deans representing the other divisions on campus left, and so if hired, I would be starting with new colleagues. I did not know, until I was hired, that my two colleagues would both be interim deans.

During my subsequent interviews and hiring, I learned that Dean Beth was an external interim and would be taking over the duties of interim dean with Business, Math and Technology and, eventually, going back to her home in Massachusetts. I also met the interim dean, at the time, of Allied Health and Natural Science, Dean Featherson. Although I felt instantly that both Dean Wilcoxson and Dean Featherson were wonderful people and leaders, I was worried about how to relate to them given that one might be leaving soon and the other might choose to leave the role of dean.

In short order, I put my concerns aside. Dean Wilcoxson brought valuable position experience, and Dean Featherson brought valuable institutional experience, and as I was learning the position and the institution, I needed help from them both to attempt a successful entry into my own position. As the three of us moved forward, we worked together to understand what was expected of us and how to do it. As a trio of deans, I have been thrilled with our work and collaboration, but therein lies the problem. Who would leave? Why would they leave?
Dean Featherson wondered if he would apply for the permanent position of Dean, and I narcissistically wondered if his questions had anything to do with his newest permanent colleague. In some ways, I tried to present myself as someone he would want to continue to work with. I hoped that if he decided to return to his faculty role, it would not be because of me! On the other hand, as we did a first search for Dean Wilcoxson’s replacement, I worried that she could be leaving at any time. Our team works so well together, it is hard to picture a good next iteration of us.

My division: Following Dean Beth

Following Dean Beth was both wonderful and difficult. It was wonderful because she served as a valuable buffer between what was and what will be. Dean Beth was able to calm chaotic waters and to allow some initial healing of frayed nerves within the division’s faculty. Dean Beth knew what needed to be done to run the division, and she had the sensitivity to work with the personalities of the division faculty and staff.

It was also wonderful to follow Dean Beth because she was so knowledgeable about the work of a dean. She made decisions that made sense. She created procedures that made sense. She supported the faculty and staff in ways that made sense. And she did all these things in a way that stabilized the division without setting up a new standard that was unwieldy and unsustainable. Dean Beth also knew where to stop. In conversations since I started, we have often spoken about things that need to change in my division, and we see many of the same issues, but Dean Beth understood the areas that should be left to the permanent dean. I am so appreciative of this wisdom because now I am able to make the required changes in ways that make sense to me. This not only allows me some control over the situations, but also allows me a greater range in movements because the faculty and staff have not been experiencing a series of changes based on who is in the Dean’s office.

It is difficult to follow Dean Beth because she is really good at what she does! However, I have used her skill to my advantage, especially since she is still with us, by learning from her. It is a remarkable asset to have Dean Beth at Forest Park because I am afforded the unique luxury of working with someone who has done my job. Being a dean is new to me, and I value the insights Dean Beth shares.

My view of the future

Although some may consider beginning a new job with interims as your closest colleagues as a negative, I see it as a blessing. I have had the benefit of two fabulous interim colleagues. I am incredibly pleased that Dean Featherson decided to apply for and was selected as the permanent dean for his area, and I feel uniquely privileged to work with Dean Wilcoxson for as long as she is with us. The worst part about this situation is that, despite us being a great team of deans who value one another, we know at some point we will have to deal with additional change and a new period of adjustment. I would happily work with these two deans for the rest of my career, and I can only hope that whoever fills Dean Wilcoxson’s shoes will bring the same willing spirit and thoughtful ability to her office.

The presentations will be followed by a general discussion.