
LOS PERROS STATE UNIVERSITY

It was July 2010, and Sandy Avner reflected on the challenges ahead of her as she prepared to take on the presidency of Los Perros State University (LPSU). Her excitement and optimism were high, but she knew the way ahead would not be easy.

Shared Governance

Avner liked the emphasis on shared governance that was part of LPSU's history and culture. However, she knew from experience that making it work was easier said than done. Her predecessors' approach to shared governance had led to a highly decentralized structure that gave deans, chairs, and faculty substantial autonomy. She had been told that the system tended to be cumbersome and it sometimes seemed as if no one was in charge of anything. Decisions tended to take forever, as various committees and groups wrestled on and on.

Trust and the Curriculum

She also knew that she needed to address mutual trust between faculty, administration, and board. The College of Arts and Sciences, which included more than half of LPSU's faculty, was a particular sore spot. Departmental in-fighting and an ineffective dean (who served for ten years) had turned the school into a war zone. Filled with paranoia and suspicion, faculty generally distrusted one another and the administration. This mistrust had stalled the previous president's signature initiative – reform of the general education curriculum. The old curriculum consisted of a loose set of distribution requirements. The president and provost had charged a faculty curriculum committee to develop a plan that would ensure greater coherence in the core curriculum, and make it feasible to assess student learning outcomes. After a year's work, the committee developed an innovative, interdisciplinary proposal. Student response was generally favorable, but the new plan met substantial resistance from faculty and department chairs.

The impact on distribution of student credit hours, which had a significant impact on resource allocation, was the biggest source of opposition, but many faculty also resisted the interdisciplinary courses that were a central element in the new curriculum. A particular sore spot was the first-year seminars, designed around a common syllabus and readings to create a learning experience that all first-year students could share. Although faculty could innovate around the core elements, many viewed the seminars as too prescriptive. Departments often assigned the seminars to adjuncts or junior faculty because senior faculty resisted teaching them. Students noticed – and complained. The president had now departed. The provost was still here, but his credibility and authority seem to have been impaired. The faculty senate recently voted to review the curriculum and consider eliminating the first-year seminars.

Finances

Conflict over the new curriculum was exacerbated by serious financial pressures – a result of declines in state funding in recent years. Faculty had received average increases of less than 2%

This case was prepared by Lee Bolman, Bloch School of Business and Public Administration, University of Missouri-Kansas City and updated by Kent Chabotar, President, Guilford College, in preparation for its use at the 2011 AGB Workshop for Board Professionals. It is a composite case, based on real events that occurred at several different institutions. It is intended as a basis for class discussion, and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. © 2006 by Lee Bolman. Used with permission.

Los Perros State University

in the past six years, which had included two years with no raises. Some strong faculty had left, and many who remained felt that they deserved higher pay.

Faculty were also suspicious of the financial data that they got from the administration. Budgeting and financial management were still largely in the hands of the administration, but Avner was aware that some institutions had instituted more open and participatory budgeting processes. Avner wondered if such an innovation would help to reduce the mistrust at Los Perros. Nevertheless, she worried that it might simply become a cumbersome forum for political jockeying, which already seemed to be the most popular indoor sport at LPSU.

Administrative Team

Then there was the question of her administrative team. Avner felt that the Vice Presidents for Administration and for Student Affairs were able, but was less confident about others. The advancement VP had been in the job for 20 years and had many friends in the community, but seemed to be better at schmoozing than finding money. The provost, Ken Jackson, was widely unpopular, partly because he was no more than lukewarm about shared governance. He and his allies believed that LPSU had already given away too much power to the faculty, and had got very little in return. In his words, "Look, the faculty act like a bunch of children with the decision-making they already have. We were hired to make decisions, and we're held accountable." Jackson had applied for the presidency and Avner wondered if he still carried some resentment that she got the job instead of him. Her executive assistant, Pam Matthews, had worked for her predecessor and had been a competent liaison for the search committee; Matthews seemed eager to continue in her role.

Competitive Pressures

Avner was also concerned that Los Perros had a high percentage of long-term faculty who had never taught anywhere else. Even though there were some very talented individuals, the faculty as a whole tended to be cautious and even provincial in responding to possible changes in curriculum or programs. The world was changing very fast. Could LPSU keep up? Avner was eager to increase faculty diversity, but she expected resistance. LPSU had recently instituted a policy requiring that faculty search committees include the best affirmative action candidate among their top three candidates. The first committee to conduct a search under the new policy recommended as their affirmative action candidate a non-U.S. citizen who spoke very poor English.

When LPSU attained university status in the 1980s, it was expected to become more research-oriented. Course loads had been reduced, but anticipated gains in research productivity had not materialized. The university still faced pressures to strengthen research. But, in the face of funding pressures, the provost has been pushing deans to assign higher teaching loads to faculty who were not research-active. This met predictable resistance. The dean of the College of Business, which had many tenured faculty with little or no scholarly output, had attempted to implement the provost's policy, but the result was a firestorm that made headlines in the student newspaper and raised eyebrows in the business community.

Board Issues

An equally worrisome aspect of the decentralization and politicization of decisions was the tendency for aggrieved faculty to make end runs to the board when things were not going the way they wanted. This had been happening for some years, and was fostered by a split in the board between a conservative, pro-business group, and a more liberal, pro-faculty faction. The conservatives were strongly opposed to the end-runs, but the liberals felt they needed to be in regular contact with the faculty to know what was happening on campus.

Avner's predecessor had fueled this problem by tightly controlling information, and there had been several cases where the board felt blindsided by the president's failure to keep them informed. Avner was entering with the support of most (though not all) board members, but she knew the honeymoon might be brief. She was developing a very good relationship with the board chair, Phil Watson, but she wondered if Watson's genial low-key style would be sufficient to deal with the problems of board functioning. How could she work with Watson and the board on these issues?

Schnebly Affair

Finally, Avner wondered what to do about the Schnebly affair. Susan Schnebly, a former member of the board of trustees, had offered to donate to the college a valuable piece of real estate near the Los Perros campus. The land was vacant except for a large, old barn. Schnebly wanted to see the barn become a performing arts center, and LPSU hoped to build much-needed student housing on the land as well. But, neighborhood residents opposed anything that might increase noise and traffic, and were actively lobbying city and state officials. Avner's predecessor had devoted relatively little time to building relationships with the community, and many saw the university as arrogant. It was also clear that there were conflicts between Schnebly's ideas about a performing arts center, and what the college really needed. Moreover, the campus had a significant problem of deferred maintenance on its existing physical plant. Where would it find the money that would be needed to capitalize on the Schnebly donation? Was this a white elephant or a diamond in the rough?

Strategic Planning and Focus

A board member who was a successful management consultant had recently told her that many of the problems at LPSU could be traced to the absence of a clear institutional mission and strategy. He recommended that she begin a process of mission-clarification and strategic planning and offered to help her do it. Avner knew that the Los Perros mission statement was too vague and non-controversial to provide much direction, but she worried that any attempt to change it might set in motion a protracted battle on campus and with the board. Avner wondered what Phil Watson thought about this fellow board member's ideas.

Avner ran across the following passage in Hedrick Smith's *The Power Game*:

The effectiveness of the presidency and the capacity of any president to lead depend on focusing the nation's political attention and its energies on two or three top priorities. Without vision, focus, and direction, government falls into disarray and the country falls adrift (Smith, 1988, pp. 333-334).

Los Perros State University

"That sounds right," thought Avner to herself. "Los Perros is adrift. How do I find the vision and focus it needs?"

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. If you were Pam Matthews, how would you help Sandy Avner prioritize the challenges that the institution faces?
2. As Avner prepares for an upcoming meeting with Phil Watson, board chair, to discuss goals for the first year of her presidency, what should she put on the list? What should she say about her expectations of the board chair?
3. How do you support Avner and gain her trust in order to benefit the institution and possibly remain executive assistant to the president?