

How Canadian University Deans Make Sense of their Reappointments

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a multiple-case study of thirteen reappointed and one non-reappointed Canadian university deans. The paper examines how deans make sense of their reappointments and clarifies their intended and unintended outcomes. The findings reveal that reappointments are political arenas where politics are embedded, essential, and problematic. In addition, though most reappointed deans deemed their reappointments satisfactory, serving, in some cases, as sources of strength, they nevertheless identified several critical issues. Of particular importance, the study brings to light how reappointments tend to overly focus on popularity and can induce unwarranted duress and fatigue.

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### **Purpose**

Though measuring managers' performance remains fundamentally important (Kellerman, 2012; Pfeffer, 2015), the outcomes of currently implemented processes remain ill-understood, in particular with regards to university deans. To that end, this study identifies the outcomes of deans' reappointments and their impact on performance by investigating how Canadian university academic deans make sense of their reappointments.

Academic deans play important and complex leadership roles in Canadian universities, yet their reappointments hinge on performance appraisals that remain poorly understood. Performance appraisals are generally considered to be effective processes to control, measure, and improve individual and organizational performance (e.g. Dooren, Bouckaert, & Halligan, 2010; Le, Oh, Shaffer, & Schmidt, 2007; McDavid, Huse, & Hawthorn, 2012). However, empirical investigations have challenged these rational assumptions and questioned performance appraisals' purported effectiveness (e.g. Grubb, 2007; Murphy, 2008; Osterman, 2007). In particular, a number of studies have brought to light the impact of organizational politics on performance appraisals (e.g. Gioia & Longenecker, 1994; Murphy et al., 2003; Murphy, Cleveland, Skattebo, & Kinney, 2004; Swanepoel, Botha, & Mangonyane, 2014).

### **Literature**

Deans' reappointments have never been the focus of empirical research. A small body of research has investigated deans' performance evaluation, but these studies have either kept a bird's eye view of currently implemented evaluations (Hodges & Christ, 1987) or looked at potential evaluation schemes (Heck, Johnsrud, & Rosser, 2000; Rosser, 2003; Rosser, Johnsrud, & Heck, 2003; Vieira da Motta & Bolan, 2008). In addition, all of these studies

focused their attention on deans in the United States.

### **Framework**

The conceptual framework focuses on the “taming of power” (Russell, 1938/2004, p. 224). It combines Mayes and Allen’s (1977) definition for political behaviour, Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwarter, and Ferris’s (2002) and Ouimet’s (2008) political leadership models, and Van Maanen and Schein’s (1977) organizational socialization theory to conceptualize how deans’ reappointments impact their leadership.

### **Methods and Data Sources**

Thirteen reappointed deans and one non-reappointed dean participated in the study. The participants came from eight universities spread across four provinces. The sample included a slightly higher number of research universities, professional faculties, and male deans.

The study used Yin’s (2013) multiple case study method. Data collection focused on interviews concentrating on participants’ life histories, experiences, and sense-making (see Seidman, 2012). Each interview was supplemented by internal and external documents, such as reappointment policies, strategic plans, and biographical notes.

Coding of the interview transcripts and documents proceeded in four stages. The first stage was descriptive and identified what deans were describing, for example being informed of their upcoming reappointments or receiving feedback. The second stage differentiated between their experiences, what happened, and their sense-making, how they understood their experience. The third stage of coding grouped their sense-making into themes. These themes were identified based on two criteria: prevalence, the majority of deans shared a similar experience or sense-making; and salience, the gravity of the experience or sense-making was sufficient that it required reporting. Salience was applied, for example, in the rarer cases where deans reported being harmed by the process.

The number of reappointed deans in Canadian universities is relatively small. In accordance with the ethical guidelines set forth for this study to ensure confidentiality, findings are expressed in cross-case analyses instead of individual ones.

### **Findings**

Overall, Canadian university deans understand their reappointments as political arenas where politics are embedded, as the process determines who shall lead the academic unit, essential, as the many voices within the unit should be given a voice in the process, and problematic, as reappointments can easily be derailed by the maneuverings of a few individuals.

As well, deans view their reappointments as a measure of their popularity, though they recognize that popularity is an important facet of their leadership. However, despite this, deans are of the view that their decisions were only mildly shaped by the prospect of being reappointed.

Though reappointments are often challenging experiences, deans also recognize that they can be sources of strength for their deanship, in particular as they force a moment of reflection, for them and for their faculties, to look at the past and prepare for the future.

Finally, though deans view reappointments as overall satisfactory, they nevertheless identify several ways by which they can and should be improved. In particular, reappointments should rely at least on better informed opinions through explicit criteria, ensure that they cannot easily be derailed by individuals, involve fewer resources, and, more importantly, better protect deans from psychological duress and fatigue.

### **Significance**

This study is the first to investigate deans' reappointments. As such, it not only clarifies what takes place during these critical processes, but also brings to light some of the

unintended consequences of performance appraisals of managers.

In addition, the findings support in part how the link between organizational politics and leadership is conceptualized, but also challenges the models by identifying where they fall short. In particular, the study shows that reappointments have a modest impact on deans' leadership, suggesting that other dimensions, such as values and job security, may play as important a role as political considerations.

Deans' reappointments have high stakes for deans, faculties, and universities. This study looks at those understudied processes by giving a voice to the deans, who stand on the receiving ends of reappointment processes. Its results provide key insights and offer new questions to further investigate the exercise of academic leadership in Canadian universities. The findings have implications for policymakers who need to review existing reappointment policies and fix some of their most salient issues. The findings of this study can guide these efforts.

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