

Using Cases in Higher Education

A Guide for Faculty and
Administrators

James P. Honan and
Cheryl Sternman Rule



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Preface

Colleges and universities are inordinately complex, multilayered organizations in which numerous constituents—students, faculty members, administrators, staff members, trustees, and alumni—interact with one another over a broad spectrum of issues in order to further the goals of higher education. Due to this complexity, and the sheer number of constituencies involved, teaching about the issues confronting higher education leaders poses special challenges. Teaching and learning with case studies can be an especially effective pedagogical approach for both capturing and bringing to life the issues simmering in this environment. Why? Only by describing situations as they have actually occurred, through the lenses of the actual faculty members or administrators who have experienced them, can we capture fully the nuances of a budget struggle, governance battle, or policy formulation dilemma. Faculty members who teach graduate courses in higher education administration and those who teach in various professional development institutes and executive education programs for experienced practitioners have increasingly made ample use of the case study method as an integral part of their pedagogy.

In an era when colleges and universities seek administrators who possess and exhibit exceptional problem-solving and leadership abilities, case studies constitute windows through which

academic leaders can observe and learn from administrative successes and foibles on other campuses. Some college and university administrators, even those with many years of experience, typically approach problems in a “tried-and-true” way. By examining and discussing situations in which leaders have used novel problem-solving techniques, these same administrators might be able to move beyond comfortable responses and routines and envision new ways of working and leading. Ideally, the glimpses that case study discussions provide into others’ strategies will help both current and future academic leaders test new perspectives on a particular problem or dilemma and expand their own repertoires of administrative skills and abilities.

Faculty members have grumbled for years about how raises are awarded in the College of Engineering at a large urban university. While aware of the simmering dissatisfaction for some time, the dean has not known how to address the issue effectively. Until now, he has ignored the problem, hoping that it would either go away on its own or at least remain beneath the surface while other issues occupied the faculty’s overloaded agenda. While attending a summer institute for midlevel managers, the dean read a case study detailing a similar scenario at another university in the early 1990s. By reading the case study, discussing it with his peers, and fleshing out, with the guidance and support of his institute colleagues, how he would broach the issue on his own campus, the dean was emboldened to draft a new workload and salary equity proposal to discuss with his faculty members that fall.

This scenario represents just one way in which case studies can help enlighten, inform, and inspire administrators to take a fresh approach to campus problem solving and policy making.

When used well, case studies represent powerful pedagogical tools to develop and strengthen an administrator’s ability to ana-