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## Choosing 'Dean' as a Career Path? You'd be 1st

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## Choosing 'Dean' as a Career Path? You'd be 1<sup>st</sup>

**By Alvin Wang**  
UCF Forum columnist  
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The position figures prominently in popular culture but doesn't appear anywhere else in the military, government or corporate sectors — leading to a lack of understanding about the job.



John Vernon as the beleaguered Dean Wormer in 1978's 'Animal House.' (Photo courtesy of Universal Pictures)

No one ever thinks of becoming a dean — yet college campuses load up on them. There are deans of admissions, deans of students, deans of faculty, deans of arts and sciences,

engineering, medical schools and more. But that's a good thing! There are even national associations of collegiate deans.

So who are these people? Who ends up being a dean?

Let's start with undergraduate students. Ask any undergraduate about his/her career aspirations and none, zip, nada will say "I want to become a college dean." The same goes for graduate students, even those in doctoral programs whose career aspirations are likely to include remaining in academia as a professor or researcher.

If you were to suggest to them a career path that included being a college dean, you will most likely encounter a blank stare (at best) or at worst a stifled guffaw. If you had asked me during my graduate school days, my response would have been the blank stare along with "Dean? What's that? What does a dean do?"

But that was before I returned to the psychology classroom this year after spending 11 years as dean of UCF's Burnett Honors College.

Evidently, being a dean is not among the dreams and lofty goals of students.

Evidently, being a dean is not among the dreams and lofty goals of students. Certainly, there is no formal training track to prepare for this role (Deanship 101? It doesn't exist in any college catalog). And yet here we are — faculty members who bear the title of dean.

What do deans do? The pithy answer would be things of a decanal nature. The term "dean" is from the Middle English *deen*, which in turn is derived from the Latin *decanus*, which originally referred to a "chief of 10." During the Middle Ages, when the earliest European universities were associated with the church, a dean would have been "a leader of 10 monks." This is why college commencements are so medieval in appearance. Gowns, hoods and other marks of academic regalia have retained their ecclesiastical appearance because of this early association between the church and universities.

So the etymology of the term dean suggests that we should lead. Certainly, leadership and resource management are the primary responsibilities of every college dean. However, different types of deanships require a specialized knowledge and skill set regarding the constituencies that they serve. For instance, a dean of admissions oversees the policies and procedures that underlie the identification and selection of prospective students. Deans of students must advocate for the best interest of students, while deans of faculty must promote policies that encourage faculty development.

As dean of an honors college, my primary responsibility was to oversee all of the programs that provide curricular and co-curricular enrichment to our students. This involves course development, budget oversight, staff supervision, campus life, college advancement and community outreach. All of these responsibilities are undertaken with the best interests of our students in mind and always in support of the overall academic mission of our university.

Curiously, the college dean has figured prominently in popular culture — often even more than the college president or other leadership figures on campus. Perhaps the public's lack of awareness as to what deans really do is attractive to filmmakers because it allows them creative license when crafting the role of an academic administrator. I also think it has something to do with the fact that the position of dean is solidified in academia because it is not found elsewhere. It doesn't exist in the ranks of the military, government or the corporate sector. Can you imagine someone with the title "Dean of Industry" or "Dean of Human Resources?"

'Well, as of this moment, they're on DOUBLE SECRET PROBATION!'

In 1978, the movie *Animal House* forever sealed the comedic image of a college dean as the central, albeit beleaguered campus administrator. Who can forget Dean Vernon Wormer when he uttered: "The time has come for someone to put his foot down. And that foot is me!" In another memorable scene, Dean Wormer demands that the entire miscreant Delta House fraternity be placed on probation. When told that they are already on probation he snarls "They are? Well, as of this moment, they're on DOUBLE SECRET PROBATION!"

Rodney Dangerfield's 1986 film comedy *Back to School* portrayed the college dean as a beleaguered character worthy of our laughter, pity and scorn. In this movie, Dean David Martin (referred to, of course, as Dean Martin!) is beset on all sides by the conflicting needs of students, faculty and donors. Yet when push comes to shove, he comes down on the side of a wealthy donor played by Dangerfield. His character is wealthy businessman Thornton Melon, who is accepted as a college freshman only after making a large gift to the college. When Dean Martin's unethical decision to admit Thornton as a student is challenged, his response is "Uh, right...In Mr. Melon's defense, it was a *really* big check."

In the 2006 film comedy *Accepted*, a slacker whose application was rejected by every college decides to create his own college with an open-admissions policy. But when hundreds of students and family members arrive at the start of the school year, something needs to be done. Somehow this bogus college needs to gain instant credibility. The answer? Hire a bogus dean who can meet with parents and assure them of their student's educational experience. Note that it wasn't a college president, or even professors who were needed to lend credibility to this start-up college — it was a dean!

The popular notion is promulgated that deans are the leading administrative figures on campus who are empowered to build universities and construct dorms and sports stadiums. In real life, a college president and the institution's CFO have more to do with building campus infrastructure and I am not aware of any stadiums that were built because of the efforts of a single dean — not even a dean on steroids.

Why do people choose to become deans? Maybe some ego is involved, but I'm convinced that there is a higher motive that compelled me as well as others to assume leadership positions in higher education.

The motive is clear and simple — to make a difference. After all, that is why my colleagues and I entered academia: to effect positive change by our teaching and research. As campus leaders, deans embrace the challenge of making a difference that can impact an entire college and university and for the right reasons.

So it is with a great deal of fondness that I look back upon my years as dean. While I no longer serve in this role, I still attend commencements where I don my medieval hood and gown and recognize the accomplishments of our graduating seniors. And with a smile I contemplate my decanal days.

*Alvin Wang resumed his role as a professor in the University of Central Florida's Department of Psychology in August after serving 11 years as dean of the Burnett Honors College. He can be reached at [Alvin.Wang@ucf.edu](mailto:Alvin.Wang@ucf.edu).*