**A CONCEPT PAPER:**

**Defining the Role of the Academic Unit Manager**

**in the College of Arts & Sciences**  
**Cornell University**

**Background**

In December 2004, a task force of managers was convened to examine the role of administrative manager in the College of Arts and Sciences. We were charged with determining the common activities and responsibilities that managers of academic units hold; defining the expectations and standards for the fully developed role of academic unit manager; and creating a document summarizing the value and importance of the administrative manager role.

The term "administrative manager" is used in this document to include other working titles that are currently in use throughout the College, such as: Department Manager, Associate Director, Business Manager, Administrative Director, Administrator or Program Manager. The term “chair” refers to academic leadership positions such as department chairs and program directors.

**Assumptions**

1. Programmatically, each department or program within the College of Arts and Sciences is unique, and each unit has special needs and challenges to be managed.

2. While this document describes the fully developed role of manager, the size of a unit may affect the scope and complexity of the managerial function. Smaller and less complex units may have a position that combines elements of this role with significant hands-on administrative tasks.

3. The purpose of each unit in the college may affect the scope and complexity of the managerial function.

4. Administrative tasks, although important to the effectiveness of any operation, are not necessarily managerial functions. This assumption does not make any given administrative duty or task any less valuable to the department or program.

5. As the principal non-academic administrator in the department, the manager works under the direction of, and in partnership with, the academic chair or director, and with the college officer.
Understanding the role of administrative manager

The administrative manager holds the senior non-academic position in a department or program. The manager oversees support staff, resources and services; is the primary source of administrative and management support for the chair; and, against the background of rotating chairs with term appointments, provides leadership and continuity for the unit's administrative activities. According to an article by Thomas McWhorter, Associate Dean at the University of Southern California, “During the past 20 years, (higher education) institutions have grown more complex and have evolved into fairly decentralized management structures.”1 McWhorter describes colleges and universities as loose hierarchies, “in which significant decision-making authority is delegated to low organizational levels” allowing academic units “a certain amount of autonomy in achieving goals and objectives.” 2

Historically, Cornell has been among the most decentralized academic institutions, and the advantages of department autonomy in creating an open and innovative environment for faculty and students have been apparent. As external regulation and compliance issues have increased and the complexity of the institution has grown, the real and felt responsibilities of central management have resulted in a move toward greater consolidation and increased control. In today’s environment, one of the best safeguards against the risk of non-compliance at the department level is a knowledgeable, competent, and institutionally responsible administrative manager.

Administrative managers perform many significant managerial functions while overseeing and directing department business and administrative operations. These functions may include participation in long and short term planning, and negotiating with college, university, and outside sources for programmatic and funding purposes. In some units the manager oversees and trains other supervisors both in and out of the manager’s job group. The full set of managerial responsibilities may vary depending on the size and complexity of the unit.

Expectations and standards

The department manager is a generalist, and as such, the position requires competencies across many functional areas. It requires strong supervisory, managerial, organizational, analytical, decision-making and problem solving skills, as well as a solid background in financial management, budgeting, fund accounting, personnel management, and a good overview of information technology and facilities management. Managers are expected to have an in-depth understanding of department business activities; to simultaneously manage multiple areas, events and deadlines; to possess strong interpersonal and communication skills; to provide leadership for the administrative staff; to cultivate and maintain a collaborative and supportive workplace; and to ensure a smooth running operation. They should have the training, knowledge,

1McWhorter, Thomas, "Doing Right by Departmental Business Officers," NACUBO Business Officer Magazine, August 2005
2 Ibid
and experience to perform their duties with minimal assistance from college or university personnel. As generalists, managers need to be resourceful in drawing on specialists from a variety of areas in order to get things done.

Managing change and disseminating critical information related to university administration while supporting and advancing unit priorities, the manager is a resource to whom faculty, staff and students turn for interpretation of policies and procedures, and for guidance in transacting business within the institution. As a primary representative of the department and of the chair, the manager interacts with a wide variety of contacts in central administration and in the college dean’s office, as well as throughout the university and beyond. Along with the chair, the administrative manager is responsible for ensuring that the unit's operations are in compliance with university regulations and that proper internal audit controls are in place. Finally, the administrative manager plays a key role by providing busy chairs with information crucial to the decision-making process and with viable options consonant with university rules and policies. A good manager insulates the chair from much of the burden of administrative processes so the chair can focus on both providing academic program leadership and contributing to his or her field of expertise.

What value does a manager bring to an organization?

Department managers are at the front line in maintaining equitable and sensible policies and procedures within a complex organization. As noted above, administrative flexibility and delegated authority are highly valued in the creative environment of a research university like Cornell, which differs in many ways from corporations with a more traditional, top-down model. The best way to ensure autonomy, with respect and approval from central offices, is to manage that unit well.

A manager is also responsible for compliance with federal regulations; curriculum support; program and students services administration; and for analyzing data, planning, and producing a variety of reports in support of departmental goals and objectives. Managers are uniquely positioned at a high enough level to help make decisions reflecting diverse requirements in these areas.

Faculty, staff and students are sometimes unfamiliar with university policies, procedures and precedents that govern most business activities. As the resident expert on regulatory matters, a manager makes administrative obstacles both understandable and non-threatening. The administrative manager serves as a resource to those who struggle to work within the bureaucracy of a large research university, adding value to the unit by establishing standards and respecting the department’s unique culture and traditions within a climate of continuous change and challenge.

In short, administrative managers take responsibility, solve problems, consider consequences and make things happen.
The value of strong local management

This document highlights the position of department manager, and to a larger extent it touches on the fundamental philosophy of Cornell's distributed administrative structure. The functionality of this type of organization depends on such things as delegated authority, departmental autonomy, trust, control, and compliance; administrative flexibility with accountability and institutional responsibility in support of academic freedom; maintaining stability within the context of change; and accommodating each department’s culture, identity, and uniqueness as expressed in its management style. Our administrative structure should not impede departments or individuals from reaching their best, but rather, it should facilitate even greater discovery and achievement.

Cornell’s proven model enables departments to manage their affairs by making timely decisions based on direct knowledge of the challenges and opportunities as they are presented, along with essential guidance and support from the colleges and the university. Local administrators manage resources while customizing services and advancing unit priorities. Faculty benefit from administrators who embrace their objectives, accommodate their personal styles, and are responsive to unexpected circumstances. Through their continuing work with faculty, local administrative staff often become strongly committed to the individuals and departments they support, deriving great satisfaction from their own contributions to the success of the team.

While acknowledging the importance of institutional compliance and accountability, we believe that a renewed commitment to strengthen Cornell’s distributed administrative structure, especially now, at the beginning of a new university administration, is important for maintaining and increasing the stature of our university.

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Respectfully submitted by,
The Task Force to Identify the Role of Managers (TFIRM)
John Miner, Physics
Elaine Scott, Peace Studies
Judy Virgilio, Government (co-chair)
Colette Walls, Romance Studies (co-chair)

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Addendum to
“A CONCEPT PAPER: Defining the Role of the Academic Unit Manager in the College of Arts & Sciences Cornell University”

Commonalities, competencies and qualities of administrative managers, as identified by Department Chairs:

- Provides leadership
- Is well organized
- Is skilled in budgeting, financial management and people management
- Provides creative solutions to funding problems
- Identifies compliance issues and cites relevant policies
- Negotiates effectively
- Juggles many things at once - prioritizes, delegates, oversees and follows through
- Anticipates problems and takes appropriate action
- Demonstrates and promotes pride in work and commitment to the department
- Plays an advocacy role for faculty, staff and students in the department and also for the College and University
- Understands department priorities
- Is unflappable, calm and clear-thinking in a crisis
- Makes sound decisions, judgments
- Is ultimately responsible and accountable
- Sets the standard of excellence for the staff
- Is responsible for the staff - placement, training, workload, performance, success
- Provides stability
- Imparts vision
- Promotes good morale and a positive working atmosphere
- Treats staff fairly, builds trust and inspires confidence
- Keeps key people informed and touches all the bases
- Solves problems, makes things happen, gets things done, and executes the plan
- Knows how to find answers and who to call; is collaborative
- Is firm, when needed, with the staff, students and faculty
- Is able to adjust, be flexible and respond appropriately to changing conditions
- Is dependable
- Provides institutional memory for the department
- Is technically competent