VIEWPOINT

A Year in Third Person

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I have often stated that the year I transitioned from practicing in a community setting to practicing in a health system was my most challenging—until now. In July 2014, I left the AACP Annual Meeting as a faculty member, and one day later I was an interim dean. Throughout this year, I learned and grew in many ways, but I was not prepared to be addressed in the third person.

You may see this happen when policies or decisions are attributed to “the dean.” Even during meetings in which I participate, I am referred to as “the dean” even by colleagues next to whom I am sitting, with whom I have a first-name relationship. Perhaps we could attribute the third-person reference to respect for the position. However, it also depersonalizes the individual serving as dean. Is it harder to disagree with the dean (ie, the office) than Cynthia the person?

The other aspect of my third-person persona is addressed when students or others mention “the administration.” In meetings with students who mention this vague moniker I have to push back a little. I ask them who they think “the administration” is. In reality, each person with an administrative title also is a faculty member devoted to student success. Yet, as part of “the administration,” depersonalization occurs.

As my year as interim dean draws to a close, I have a renewed appreciation for colleagues who seek and accept the role of CEO dean. Many aspects of the CEO dean’s job are fun. I have enjoyed nothing more than awarding scholarships or nominating faculty members for well-deserved recognition. As faculty members, we do not know the full context of how a CEO dean’s time is consumed: there are more meetings than one would think possible and issues that cannot be discussed with anyone. These can involve student difficulties, faculty requests, promotion decisions, and responses to lawyers or even the chancellor, to name a few. University processes are complex, and finances and personnel consume a considerable amount of time. Whenever possible, I worked with an open door. Anyone who stopped by always started with, “I know you are busy . . .,” but I so enjoyed impromptu conversations that became less frequent once I became “the dean.”

I am thankful for my year in third person. I am proud of our collective accomplishments, and I look forward to supporting the new dean. This experience has helped to prepare me for my year as AACP president, but please do not call me “the president.” Cynthia is fine.