

In April, Johns Hopkins University Press is publishing a book titled, *The Provost's Handbook: The Role of the Chief Academic Officer*. Edited by James Martin and James E. Samels, it features seventeen essays written by chief academic officers. Early reviews claim it is essential reading for every aspiring, new, and veteran chief academic officer.



When I became the provost and almost every day since, I have encountered two questions: “What, exactly, is a provost?” and “What, exactly, does a provost do?”

What, exactly, is a provost?

If you do not know what a provost is, do not fret. The term is a mystery for most people. If you look it up, the word is defined as follows:

- a person appointed to superintend or preside
- an administrative officer in any of various colleges and universities who holds a high rank and is concerned with the curriculum, faculty appointments, etc.
- the chief dignitary of a cathedral or collegiate church
- the steward or bailiff of a medieval manor or an officer of a medieval administrative district
- the mayor of a municipality in Scotland
- a prison warden or keeper of the prison

The humorist Dave Barry once used the position as an example of how to avoid paying taxes. He writes:

“Speaking of criminal activity, probably the most common question asked by taxpayers is: ‘What, exactly, am I allowed to deduct as a business expense?’ The answer depends on the type of work you do. For example, let’s say you’re a university provost. You can deduct any expense you want, because nobody has a clue what ‘provost’ means. Legally, the IRS cannot touch you.”

Recently, I surveyed campus—faculty, staff, and students—for their definition of a provost. I received a variety of responses:

“The provost is the chief academic officer of the University.” — a staff member.

“Who cares?” — a faculty member.

“He’s not the president.” — a president.

“He’s the guy out early cleaning up trash and it is not even in his job title.” — a student.

“He’s the one who makes us go to class even when it is snowing.” — a faculty member.

“The provost keeps tabs on us by tricking us into liking him on Facebook or following him on Twitter. Don’t do it.” — a student.

“The provost sends out emails early. That boy don’t sleep.” — a student.

“The provost is the man who writes you, and when he does, it usually isn’t good news.” — a really bad student.

“The provost works for the deans.” — Dr. Miles.

What, exactly, does a provost do?

“Sends emails.” — a student.

“Makes us go to class even when it is snowing.” — a student.

“Nothing.” — Nancy Cox.

“Who cares?” — a faculty member

“He never lets you out of class early.” — an IDS 199 student.

“Something to do with NSSE and he will give you \$100 if you do it to.” — a freshman.

So, what do I do? It is not really about what I do; it is what I know. I know things that faculty members, students, and staff (exclusive of the president) do not know. That is what makes the provost so mysterious. I make many decisions about things based on knowledge I cannot always talk about. This often makes a decision suspect. I am observed and judged by members of the university community who are not fully informed.

While it is a burden, having the opportunity to view this institution in a way that few do, makes it worth it. In April, I will read *The Provost’s Handbook* to learn if other provosts agree.