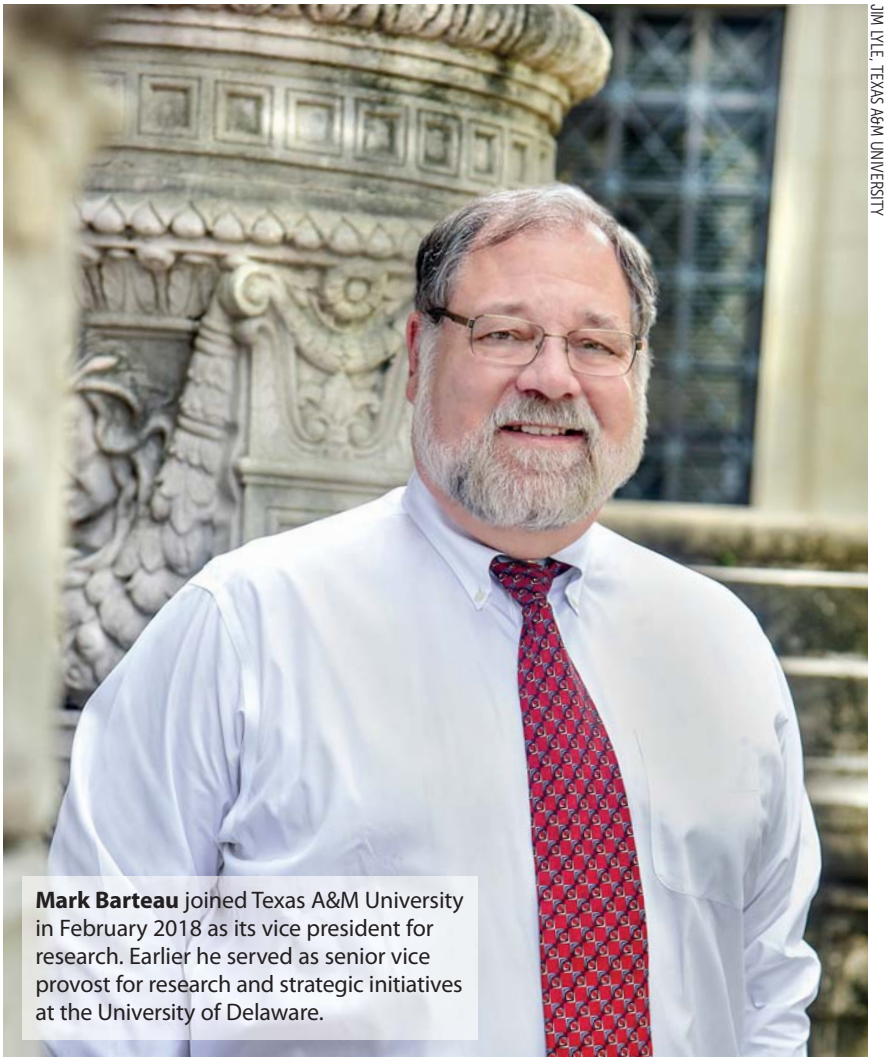
Commentary

Thinking about becoming a VPR?

If you are in a university that has a research portfolio of any size, odds are your institution has a VPR or VCR: a vice president/provost/chancellor for research. Whatever the titles and reporting structure, that person has responsibility for overseeing the institution's research enterprise, its integrity, and its compliance with legal and regulatory requirements, especially at the federal level. Depending on the school, other responsibilities may include graduate studies, university-wide institutes, or intellectual property, commercialization, and economic development. The VPR job often isn't seen as a rung on the ladder to a university presidency; the dean→provost→president path is more frequently trodden than any passing through the VPR's office.

When heading off to graduate school or deciding on a career, few academics likely had a goal of becoming a VPR—including those of us who have served in that role. I'm certain that none of us in the role fully appreciated the breadth, complexity, and challenges of the portfolio before we accepted it. So how did each of us get here, why do we love (and occasionally hate) the job, and what does it take to be successful? There are probably as many answers to those questions as there are past and present VPRs. My perspective is undoubtedly shaped by my own experiences—serving twice as a VPR (nonconsecutively and in different institutions), three times as a director of a center or institute, and seven years as a department chairperson.

Most VPRs come from the sciences, engineering, or medicine; my own education and academic home are in chemical engineering, with courtesy appointments in chemistry. Let's face it, if you don't have an appreciation for the capital demands, costs, regulatory issues, facilities needs, and safety responsibilities of conducting research in scientific fields, you will probably be underequipped for the role. Yet if you cannot credibly articulate the importance of and vigorously support creative scholarship in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, including law, public policy, and business, you may find it difficult to provide vision and leadership of multidisciplinary efforts that address the grand challenges of today and tomorrow. Those efforts are not all about science and technology, even if scorekeeping by counting research dollars often gives that appearance. The best academic leaders are those who can recognize opportunity, articulate a vision, and draw in the talents and interests of faculty members in order to define and shape actions from the bottom up.



JIM LYLE, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

Mark Barteau joined Texas A&M University in February 2018 as its vice president for research. Earlier he served as senior vice provost for research and strategic initiatives at the University of Delaware.

Research chops are also critical. A VPR who gives the impression that those who can't compete in research become research administrators is likely to be viewed by faculty members as a bureaucrat rather than as a champion and a leader. Nothing could be more damaging for motivating both the faculty and the VPR. Somewhere along the way one must also have learned to take satisfaction from fostering the success of others. Such servant leadership is essential. So is

a real commitment to the professional development of team members at all levels.

Over the past decade or more, several trends have contributed to the need for larger, more complex, but also more agile operations under the VPR. Although some people may see that growth as yet another example of "administrative bloat," our response to the trends is critical to keeping US research universities, both individually and collectively, the best in the world.

The first trend is the ever-increasing compliance burden. A new VPR is likely to be hit with an alphabet soup of committees (IACUC [institutional animal care and use committee], IRB [institutional review board], and more) and responsibilities (research integrity, export controls, and biosafety, to name a few) to which he or she may have had limited exposure as a researcher. Changes in funding-agency requirements—whether dealing with archiving and securing data or with the Common Rule, which governs research on human subjects—necessitate that the compliance team be engaged with faculty members and effectively communicate why "the way it was done last time" may no longer be satisfactory.

Compliance oversight is often a balancing act: helping faculty members carry out research in a demonstrably compliant way, with minimized burdens and hurdles, while also working cooperatively with the lawyers and auditors who often see their jobs as risk minimization rather than risk management. At major research universities, the compliance infrastructure is usually reasonably complete in extent if not always in depth. However, having mentored leaders from aspiring research institutions participating in NSF's Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research and the National Institutes of Health's Institutional Development Award program, I think it is fair to say that aspiring research institutions often underestimate the extent of their compliance needs.

The second, and more rewarding trend, is the rise of coordinated research development activities under the VPR. When I first hired an individual for such a role a decade ago, my short version of the job description was "matchmaker-in-chief"—someone who could help bring together faculty members from different fields and connect them with each other and with outside collaborators and funders to increase research competitiveness and impact. Around the same time, the National Organization of Research Development Professionals was established, recognizing the growing need for leadership and support in research development.

The drivers for the two trends have come from several directions, including the shift in federal funding away from single-investigator, curiosity-driven research and the increasing role of research universities, both public and private, in economic development. That expanding role has led to a heightened emphasis on intellectual property, entrepreneurship education for students and faculty, and commercialization. Although some people may view those topics as outside the traditional core of universities' research portfolios, they have become integral to developing partnerships and funding opportunities that benefit students and faculty and boost institutional reputations.

For me, what's important is not the title or prestige of being the VPR, it's the programs, partnerships, and facilities that I can drive forward in that role. It's enabling faculty and students to unleash their creative talents. It's the satisfaction of building launching pads for future research successes, whether they come quickly or long after one's leadership has been forgotten. Finally, it's the call to be a champion, both within the university community and beyond—to alumni, community and business leaders, elected officials, media, thought leaders, and more—for the vitality of our research universities. How better to help meet the challenges of today and to ensure that we advance the human and scientific capabilities to meet those of tomorrow?

Mark A. Barteau
(barteau@tamu.edu)
Texas A&M University
College Station

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