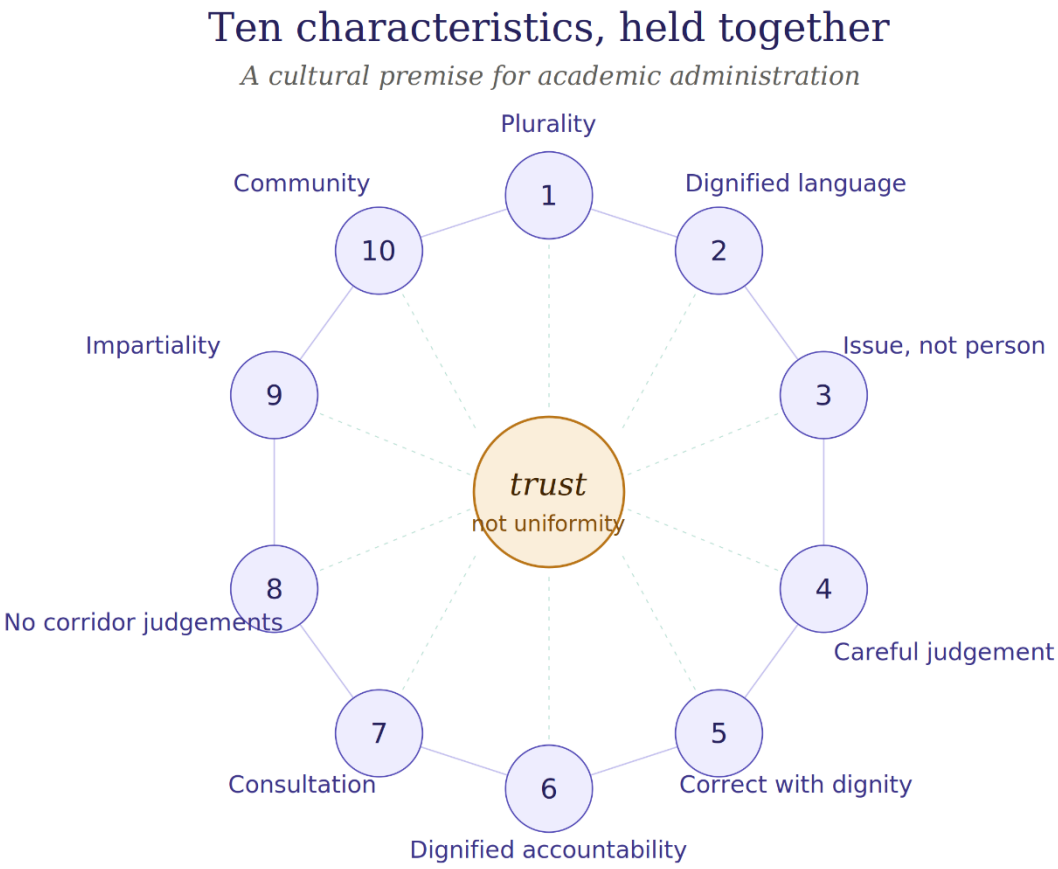
Facilitator's Guide[1]

A companion to 'Ten Characteristics of an Ideal University Academic Administrator'



An institution still being formed by what we choose to practise.

Purpose of this guide

This guide is designed for use in faculty development sessions, induction programmes, departmental meetings, and mentoring conversations. It accompanies the document 'Ten Characteristics of an Ideal RV University Academic Administrator' and translates its principles into discussion hook & short cases that faculty (particularly early-career colleagues) can engage with directly.

[1] All interpretations, decisions, and final wording reflect the author(s) judgment.
Disclaimer: Personal opinions do not reflect those of our employer & drafted in my capacity as Vice Chancellor for internal use; shared here as personal reflection, not institutional policy.

The aim is not compliance but cultivation. The characteristics describe a culture, and a culture is built through shared reflection, observation of senior colleagues, and the slow accumulation of small judgements made well. This guide offers structured opportunities for that reflection.

The opportunity is that the institutional culture of university is still being formed; what we practise now will become what is normal here. The responsibility is that the ten characteristics described in the companion document will not embed themselves through circulation alone. They must be discussed, rehearsed, and made part of how colleagues talk to and about one another.

This guide offers structured occasions for that discussion. The cases are drawn from situations that arise in any growing university and have been written to feel close to university's daily working life: the cross-school elective, the interdisciplinary committee, the new programme launch, the capstone jury, the industry partnership, the student grievance routed through three offices before it reaches the right person.

How to use this guide

- **Format:** Each session can run for 60 to 75 minutes with 8 to 15 participants. Smaller groups allow deeper conversation.
- **Sequence:** Sessions can be conducted in the order presented or selected based on departmental priorities. The first three sessions are recommended as foundational and are best run early in the academic year.
- **Facilitation:** Senior faculty, mentors, or academic administrators can facilitate. The facilitator's role is to draw out perspectives, not to deliver conclusions. A dean facilitating should be willing to be questioned by junior colleagues in the room.
- **Cases:** All cases are illustrative composites and not based on any specific individual or incident at university. Participants should be encouraged to discuss them in the third person and avoid naming or hinting at real colleagues.
- **Confidentiality:** What is shared in the room stays in the room. This norm should be stated at the start of every session.
- **Pairing with mentoring:** These sessions work best when accompanied by structured mentoring within each school. The cases give colleagues a shared vocabulary; the mentoring gives them a person to think aloud with.

A note on facilitator stance

Young faculty often arrive at such sessions expecting a list of dos and don'ts. The facilitator's task is to resist that framing. Each session should feel like a workshop in judgement, not a lecture in conduct. Where participants reach an uncomfortable insight: 'I have done this myself' then the facilitator should hold the space without rushing to reassurance. Where disagreement emerges, it should be welcomed as a sign that the discussion has reached real ground.

It is also worth saying explicitly: facilitators should not present the ten characteristics as descriptions of how senior colleagues already behave. They are aspirations for the institution, including for those leading it. Acknowledging this openly tends to make the room more honest.

These ten characteristics drafted are essentially a description of *administrative maturity;* which is hard to teach through circulars or one-off workshops. Maturity must be cultivated, not announced.

Some suggestions:

- Start with why these characteristics exist, not what they are
- Use cases, not principles
- Pair younger faculty with senior colleagues, deliberately
- Address the "narrow world" (single discipline, single institution, or single intellectual tradition) problem directly
- Make language a visible practice
- Build small rituals of reflection
- Don't expect uniformity, and don't punish the unformed
- Hold leadership to the same standard, visibly

Session 1: The plurality of academic work

Anchored in characteristics: 1, 9, 10

Time: 60 minutes

Opening hook (10 minutes)

Ask each participant to write down, privately, three colleagues whose contributions to university they consider important. Then ask them to write down what kind of work each of those colleagues does. Without sharing names, invite participants to describe the kinds of work that came up. Surface the spread from disciplinary teaching, interdisciplinary teaching, mentoring, school-level coordination, university-level committees, industry liaison, admissions outreach, curriculum design under the majors-and-minors structure, capstone supervision, research, to accreditation work.

Then ask the harder question: which of these do we, in conversation, treat as 'real' academic work, and which as 'service' or 'administration'?

Case for discussion (20 minutes)

Case 1.1: The quiet colleague

Dr A is a colleague in your department who rarely speaks at meetings, does not attend most public events, and has only a modest publication record. Over coffee, a younger colleague comments that Dr A 'doesn't seem to do much.' You happen to know that Dr A spends long hours mentoring struggling students, has quietly redesigned two foundational courses, and is the person every colleague turns to for assessment moderation.

What do you say in that moment? What do you not say? What would it mean to defend a colleague's contribution without disclosing private details? How does our visibility bias shape our judgements of one another?

Case for discussion (15 minutes)

Case 1.2: The cross-school elective

A faculty member in one school has been asked to teach a foundational course that is open to students from three schools as part of university's majors-and-minors structure. The course is demanding to design because the students arrive with very different backgrounds. The colleague spends a full semester rebuilding the syllabus, holds extra office hours for students unfamiliar with the discipline, and rarely publishes during that period. At a corridor conversation, a younger colleague from a different school remark that this person 'seems to have stopped doing real research' and is 'just teaching now.'

What is being missed in that judgement? What does cross-school teaching demand that single-discipline teaching does not? How does our hierarchy of academic value (typically, research above teaching, single-discipline above interdisciplinary, postgraduate above undergraduate) shape our perception of colleagues? In a university whose distinctive offering is multidisciplinary education, what should we be valuing that we currently do not?

Reflection questions (15 minutes)

- Whose work in our school is most easily overlooked? Whose work across schools is most easily overlooked? Why?
- What does it mean for university, specifically, to recognise plurality (given that we are a multidisciplinary university and not a traditional single-discipline college)?
- How do informal conversations shape our sense of who is contributing?
- What kinds of contribution are rewarded in our current systems? What kinds are not?
- Are there forms of contribution (such as: mentoring first-generation students, building industry connections, designing assessments for mixed cohorts) that we praise but do not actually weigh?

Closing (10 minutes)

Invite each participant to name one form of academic work they intend to notice and acknowledge more carefully in the coming weeks.

Session 2: Language that preserves dignity

Anchored in characteristics: 2, 3, 5

Time: 75 minutes

Opening hook (10 minutes)

Ask participants to recall a time as a student or junior colleague when they received feedback that felt unfair or harsh, and a time when they received feedback that was firm but dignified. What was the difference, in language, between the two?

Rewriting exercise (30 minutes)

Distribute the following statements. Ask participants, working in pairs, to rewrite each one so that it remains firm and clear about the issue but no longer makes a judgement on the person. Then discuss as a group.

Statements to rewrite

1. 'This faculty member is simply not committed to the department.'
2. 'The student is lazy and clearly does not care about the course.'
3. 'Dr X always has an excuse. Nothing is ever their fault.'
4. 'The capstone submissions from this batch are hopeless. Did the supervisor even read them?'
5. 'Frankly, I don't think this colleague has the right attitude for our culture.'
6. 'The other school's faculty don't take our courses seriously.'

Case for discussion (20 minutes)

Case 2.1: The email at 11pm

A colleague has missed a curriculum committee submission for the third time this semester. The committee is preparing materials for an accreditation review and the missed input has held up the entire school's submission. You are tired and frustrated. You begin drafting an email at 11pm that includes the line: 'This pattern reflects a complete lack of seriousness about the school's priorities.' You consider copying the dean.

What is wrong with that sentence, even if the underlying frustration is justified? What does the cc to the dean signal, and what does it cost? What might a more dignified version say while still being clear about the consequences? Why does the time of night matter? What administrative habit, individual or shared, could prevent such an email from being sent?

Closing (15 minutes)

Introduce the 'overnight rule': any email written in frustration about a colleague is held until the next morning. Discuss what other small disciplines of language could be adopted in the university, in the school, in WhatsApp groups, in committee minutes, in feedback on draft course outlines.

Session 3: Judgement before conclusion

Anchored in characteristics: 4, 7, 8

Time: 60 minutes

Opening hook (10 minutes)

Ask participants: have you ever formed a strong impression of a colleague or student that turned out, on fuller information, to be wrong? Without naming anyone, what changed your view? What did you do, or fail to do, with the earlier impression?

Case for discussion (25 minutes)

Case 3.1: The student grievance

A first-year undergraduate writes to the dean complaining that a colleague's class has been cancelled three times in the past month and that assignment feedback has been delayed. The colleague in question is known within the school as a serious teacher. The dean forwards the complaint to the programme chair with the message: 'Please look into this and revert by Friday.'

What are the questions the chair should ask before forming a view? Whom should they speak to first, and in what tone? What documentation (say, attendance records, LMS logs, the colleague's own recollection) would matter? How does the chair avoid the colleague hearing about this through an admin assistant or a student before the chair has spoken to them? What does premature conclusion look like in this situation, and what does careful judgement look like? And what should the chair say back to the dean by Friday if the situation is genuinely more layered than the email suggested?

Reflection questions (15 minutes)

- What pressures push us towards quick conclusions? Time, hierarchy, frustration, loyalty, the desire to look responsive, the desire to please external stakeholders?
- How do informal corridor conversations, especially across schools, shape our judgements before we have full information?
- What does it mean to listen before deciding, in practice and not just in principle?

Closing (10 minutes)

Each participant identifies one situation in their current work where they may be judging too quickly, and one question they could ask before reaching a conclusion.

Session 4: Accountability without fear

Anchored in characteristics: 5, 6, 7

Time: 60 minutes

Opening hook (10 minutes)

Ask: when you hear the word 'accountability,' what is the first feeling that arises: anxiety, clarity, fairness, surveillance? Why? Then ask: what is the difference between being held to a standard you understand and being measured against a standard you only encounter when you fall short of it?

Case for discussion (25 minutes)

Case 4.1: The new programme chair

A newly appointed programme chair in one of the schools wants to raise standards as the programme prepares for its first batch of graduates and the corresponding accreditation review. In the first month, the chair introduces three new tracking sheets, weekly status emails listing pending items by faculty name, and a shared dashboard of who has and has not submitted their course files. Within a few weeks, faculty morale has dropped, two senior colleagues have started avoiding programme meetings, and a junior colleague has confided to a peer that they feel constantly watched and afraid to make a mistake.

What did the chair do right, and what did they miss? How can the same goals i.e., clarity, follow-through & accreditation readiness be pursued without producing fear? What is the difference between accountability rooted in shared purpose and accountability rooted in surveillance? In a young university where many faculty are themselves early-career, what is the cost of a culture in which mistakes feel dangerous?

Reflection questions (15 minutes)

- What does dignified accountability look like in our school today? Where is it strong, and where is it fragile?
- How do we communicate the purpose behind a task (for example: a course file, an assessment moderation, an LMS update) not just the deadline?
- When have we, ourselves, responded better to trust than to monitoring?
- How does a young institution move from 'everything is urgent' to 'the right things matter'?

Closing (10 minutes)

Invite participants to name one expectation in their own work that they would want explained, not just imposed. Then invite each to name one expectation they place on others that they have perhaps never explained.

Session 5: Boundaries, impartiality, and informal influence

Anchored in characteristics: 8, 9, 10

Time: 60 minutes

Opening hook (10 minutes)

Ask: in any institution you have worked in or studied at, have you observed an 'inner circle'? How was it visible? What effect did it have on those outside it? Then ask: in a young university where many people are still figuring out where they stand, how do inner circles form and what is the cost of letting them?

Case for discussion (25 minutes)

Case 5.1: The friendly lunch

Two faculty members regularly have lunch with a senior administrator. Over time, other colleagues notice that decisions about course allocation across the majors-and-minors structure, conference funding, capstone supervision loads, and committee positions seem to favour the lunch group. There is no formal wrongdoing, only a pattern of informal closeness that produces visible advantage. A junior colleague who joined university recently mentions, half-jokingly, that they are 'still figuring out who to have coffee with.'

What is the harm here, even if no rule has been broken? What is the difference between collegial warmth and preferential access? What does the junior colleague's remark reveal about how new faculty read the institution? What can administrators do to ensure that fairness is not only practised but also visible? What can faculty themselves do to interrupt the formation of inner circles in a young institution?

Case for discussion, continued

Case 5.2: The corridor characterisation

In a casual conversation outside the staff room, a senior colleague describes a junior faculty member from another school as 'not really one of us' and 'probably not going to last past the next review.' You are present. The junior colleague is not. The conversation is overheard, in part, by a passing student.

What is at stake in this moment? What are the possible responses, and what does each one signal? How do informal reputational judgements travel across schools in a multidisciplinary university where people often do not know each other well? What is the cumulative effect on a young colleague who never hears such remarks directly but feels their consequences in committee assignments and casual exclusions? And what does it mean that a student overheard part of it?

Closing (15 minutes)

Discuss: what is one practice the department could adopt to reduce the weight of informal influence in its decisions in course allocation, in committee selection, in nominations for industry-facing roles?

Session 6: Working across schools and with external partners

Anchored in characteristics: 1, 2, 9, 10

Time: 60 minutes

Note: This session is specific to university's multidisciplinary structure and external partnerships and may be especially useful for faculty involved in cross-school programmes or industry-linked initiatives.

Opening hook (10 minutes)

Ask: when you describe university to a friend or family member, do you describe it as one university or as the school you belong to? What does your answer reveal about how we think about the institution?

Case for discussion (25 minutes)

Case 6.1: The interdisciplinary programme

Two schools jointly launch an interdisciplinary programme. In the first year, tensions surface. Faculty in one school feel that the other school's faculty are not pulling their weight in joint course design. Faculty in the other school feel that their pedagogy is being dismissed as less rigorous. Students sense the unease and begin to take sides. In a meeting, a colleague says, 'Honestly, the issue is that they don't understand what real teaching looks like.'

What has gone wrong, and at which point? How might disciplinary difference be misread as lack of effort or seriousness? What would it mean to surface the disagreement honestly without personalising it? Who in the institution is responsible for holding the space for such a conversation? And what does this case suggest about what we owe colleagues in other schools (say, in language, in assumption, in willingness to learn from how they work and such)?

Case for discussion, continued

Case 6.2: The industry partnership

University enters into a partnership with an external organisation (say, a global publisher, a technology firm, a creative studio). A small group of faculty becomes the visible face of the partnership, travels to meetings, appears in announcements, and is closely associated with the initiative. Other faculty, who have been doing significant but less visible work to make the partnership academically sound by way of mapping it to the curriculum, ensuring NEP alignment and designing the assessments feel that the visible group is being credited with the whole effort.

How should credit be distributed in such partnerships? What is the difference between visibility and contribution? What can administrators do, structurally, to ensure that less-visible academic labour is acknowledged in partnership announcements, performance reviews, and annual reports? What can the visible faculty themselves do to resist the temptation of sole authorship of an institutional achievement?

Reflection questions (10 minutes)

- In a multidisciplinary university, what is the difference between cooperation and absorption? How do we cooperate without flattening disciplinary difference?
- In external partnerships, who speaks for the institution? Who should?
- What would it look like for university, as it grows, to be known not only for its partnerships but for the dignity with which it manages them internally?

Closing (15 minutes)

Each participant names one cross-school colleague or one less-visible contributor to a recent initiative whose work they intend to acknowledge in a concrete way using a thank-you note, a mention in a meeting, a nomination for a relevant role or similar.

Individual self-assessment

This is for private reflection, not for submission. None of the questions has a single correct answer; the value lies in honest self-observation over time. The questions below are written with specific institutional context in mind.

- In the past month, did I describe a colleague in a way I would not have if they were in the room?
- Did I form a view about a situation, a programme, or another school before I had full information?
- Did I correct someone in a way that prioritised dignity, or one that prioritised being right?
- Did I notice forms of academic work (say: mentoring or assessment) that I do not usually value?
- Did I create space for someone in a meeting to disagree with me without consequence?
- Did I treat colleagues from other schools with the same seriousness I expect for my own?
- Did I ask before concluding?
- Did I model the institutional culture I would want a new colleague joining university to encounter?

For mentors and senior colleagues

These characteristics cannot be transmitted through documents alone. The most powerful learning comes from observing senior colleagues navigate difficult moments well and also from senior colleagues being willing to acknowledge, openly, when they themselves have fallen short. In a young university, where so much is being established for the first time, the gap between what we say and what we do is unusually visible to junior colleagues. Mentoring conversations are essential.

Suggested mentoring prompts

- Tell me about a recent moment in your work in your school or across schools where you were unsure how to respond. What did you do, and what would you do differently now?
- Have you observed something in our institutional culture that troubles you? You can speak freely; this conversation is not for evaluation.
- Where do you feel most uncertain about how to handle a colleague, a student, or a process at university?
- What kind of academic do you want to be in five years: not in your research, but in your conduct, your relationships, and the way colleagues describe you?
- If you could change one thing about how we currently work together, what would it be? What part of that change is within your reach?

A closing thought for facilitators

The ten characteristics describe a mature academic culture, and maturity in any institution is the work of years, not workshops. These sessions are seeds. Some will take root immediately, some over time, and some will lie dormant until a participant finds themselves in a moment that calls for the very judgement they once practised in a room of colleagues. The point is not to produce immediate transformation but to make the questions familiar enough that they return when they are needed.

— End of guide —