

# The Strategic Role of Lunch



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**T**he U.S. Military Academy is a highly centralized organization: an end-of-career superintendent manages a largely transient faculty and a hierarchical administration. Harvard, in contrast, is a highly decentralized organization: a president nudges and coaxes deans, who control most of the resources and who in turn nudge and coax department heads and faculty, who enjoy substantial autonomy. Like most other colleges and universities, the University of Chicago operates between these extremes—or, more typically and problematically, tries to combine the two. The budget process is centralized, for example, but its product is a set of formulas outlining boundaries within which deans and vice presidents have great freedom. Similarly, the university claims to have centralized telecommunications procurement, but somehow cell phones aren't included. Even faculty hiring has both centralized and decentralized components, causing occasional tension between department heads and the provost's office. Confusion results, especially regarding the processes for setting priorities, resolving conflicts, and negotiating trade-offs.

Senior leadership groups—an officers group, a deans group, and an executive budget committee—exist to resolve these tensions between decentralized and centralized goals and actions. To the extent that these groups evolve into collaborative teams, they work well for issues of general institutional importance.

They work less well for issues that involve only a subset of units: IT and Facilities, with overlapping responsibilities for design and installation; intellectual and administrative units, with divergent goals for student life; or pairs of academic departments, with a need to exploit synergies. So I—like other vice presidents, as well as deans and colleagues—have lots of lunches at the Quadrangle Club, the standard place for University of Chicago administrators and faculty to conduct lunch meetings.

For those of us with sedentary habits and no willpower, lunch can be a problem. That's especially true for me, since the Quad Club makes a delicious BLT wrap, which is in effect a handful of garnished bacon only minimally buffered by a thin wrap-

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per—and I love bacon. Ordinarily, mindful of my waistline, I'd try to avoid Quad Club lunches. But who has lunch with whom—and, sometimes more important, who sees whom having lunch with whom and stops by the table—is very important to the university's functioning. An aggregation of dyadic administrative lunches helps us behave as though we are centralized, even as each of us jealously guards his or her decentralized authority. Our lunches don't turn into negotiating sessions,

and only rarely do concrete decisions emerge from them. Rather, lunches give us the opportunity to share thoughts, experiences, perspectives, enthusiasm, paranoia, gossip—the informal information about one another that enables us to negotiate, collaborate, complain, and respond appropriately when our domains do or should engage one another.

This coming year promises to be challenging at the university: an ambitious president, lots of new vice presidents, currents of organizational and cultural change, and many trade-offs to be negotiated. Some of these challenges will call for more centralization and others for more decentralization. Some will necessitate a lunch. In this, I think, we are typical. Bacon is good.