

Back to the Faculty: Not as Easy as it Sounds

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By Fred Schwarzbach

Two years ago, I stepped down from a deanship at New York University, having spent 33 of the previous 37 years in leadership posts at three universities. I'd always thought the transition from professor to administrator was hard, but returning to faculty life has turned out to be no less difficult.

I have resumed teaching and doing research as a "clinical professor" — NYU's lingo for a non-tenure-track, full-time, teaching-oriented appointment. In the process, I've learned a few things that might benefit other academics going through the same back-to-the-faculty transition.

Give yourself plenty of lead time before the announcement. My decision to leave the deanship was voluntary, so I had the luxury of time to prepare. It took more time than I expected to make what ought to have been little adjustments — like moving to a much smaller office.

If you can, discuss the timing with your immediate supervisor and plan a strategy for announcing your resignation. I wanted time to talk with my senior staff members one-on-one, well before the general announcement. That notice went out just about a year before my last day in the office — allowing plenty of time both for professors to get used to the idea of my leaving and for the university to search for my successor.

Your departure may be harder on staff than faculty. After all, you have worked side by side on a daily basis with staff members. Without you noticing, they probably invested a great deal of time, effort, and emotional capacity learning your working style and adjusting accordingly. They became well aware of your likes and dislikes, weaknesses and strengths — even how you drink your coffee (a drop of cream, no sugar).

That is all about to change. They probably will want to talk with you about your replacement. Give them your full attention, but remind them that they need to be patient and that, in time, they'll get to know your successor just as well as they did you. Give them one good piece of advice: Don't start a conversation with your successor by saying, "The old dean used to [fill in the blank]."

Offer to help your successor — but don't be disappointed if you're not asked. You have inside knowledge about the program, the university, and the position. By all means you should offer to share it with your successor, both before and after the formal transition. And a wise new administrator, especially an outside hire, would take advantage of the offer.

But don't forget that the new leader is intent on putting his or her own stamp on the position, and your take on past events may not be all that useful. After the two of you meet, you may feel that you didn't have enough time to say all you wanted to say — but this conversation must be directed by your successor, not you.

Some people will no longer be interested in what you have to say. I found that to be the case almost immediately after stepping down. Faculty interest in administrators is transactional: What can you do for me? When you no longer are in a position to give them something they need, they move on. During my last months as dean, about 20 colleagues said to me, "I'll give you a call — we'll have lunch or a drink." Two followed through.

And in a way, I don't really mind. I always told myself that, as a dean, if a choice were necessary, I would rather be respected than liked, and I would hope to be remembered for what the program accomplished under my stewardship than for always being ready to go out for a beer. The other side of that coin is worth considering as well: You are no longer obliged to be faultlessly polite to people who were always rude and disrespectful.

Probably without realizing it, you have made a few good friends among the senior university staff. Nurture those relationships — especially with those who are making the same transition and know exactly what you're thinking and feeling.

There are actually a few things you will miss. It is easy enough to list all the things you won't miss — endless meetings, difficult personnel issues, shrinking budgets — but there probably are a few things on the debit side, too.

You will miss the way in which everyone paid attention when you entered a meeting. Or how, as if by magic, the room grew quiet when you spoke. And as much as we all decry

gossip, you may also miss being "in the loop," knowing all the inside scoops about who in the central administration was up and who was down. I felt all of that, but for me the greatest disappointment has been no longer meeting students whom I don't know but who know me because of my administrative role — like one a while back who shouted out across a busy street, "Hey, aren't you that dean dude?"

Some years back, I asked a long-serving dean, who was stepping down, what she would miss. She thought for a moment and said, "The next thing. There's always the next thing."

I know exactly what she meant. There is always an unexpected problem or crisis that requires your full attention, and when you manage to resolve it, you experience the surge of adrenaline that comes from knowing that you have pulled a rabbit out of the hat yet again. You really will miss that — both the stress and the adrenaline surge that follows. But balancing that is the realization that when there is a crisis, it will be someone else who has to resolve it.

Besides the excitement, you may miss being so completely other-directed. As administrators, we are always helping other people: Our days were filled with projects that benefited others. Now you must schedule your own time, and what you do will be primarily for yourself. At times, I have felt very guilty about investing time in me, and you probably will, too.

At first, you'll enjoy doing "nothing." Once I packed up the files, tchotchkes, and books, once my name was off the office door and the website (double-check that one), and once I was physically out of the old office for good, I felt as if an enormous burden was lifted from my weary shoulders.

That is a cliché, I know, but I really did feel relieved: I was no longer on call 24/7 to deal with emergencies, I no longer had to check my email and phone every five minutes, and my calendar suddenly was made of largely blank spaces. My time was entirely my own to manage.

And I really did enjoy the sudden rush of freedom and the opportunity to do "nothing" — which really meant, do all of the things I'd never had time to do. I read a trashy novel that I'd bought in an airport a few years back and never opened; I indulged in a binge-watch on Netflix (*Spiral*, a French TV show, all seven seasons); I went for long walks in the middle of the day; I went to the gym more often and stayed longer; I went to a couple of theater matinees; and a few times I just sat in the park. My experience of everyday life was enriched by renewed appreciation for the myriad small pleasures of just living in this world.

But that moment didn't last very long for me, and it probably won't for you, either. Soon it will be time to get back to work — different work, but work all the same.

Remember, this is a transition for your family, too. Whatever your administrative role has

been, the chances are that it filled most of your available time and took most of your psychic energy as well. Mine certainly did, and it involved a great deal of international travel, as well, so I was often away for long periods of time.

To be blunt, your family is not used to having you around, and they may not really want you around *all* the time. They have their lives and their routines, and they will find it a bit of a strain in those first few months if you insist on tagging along whenever they go out. No doubt you have been looking forward to spending more time with them — but there can be too much of that good thing.

You still have contributions to make. The good news is that there are ways to continue to work for the commonweal. One of the complaints I often have heard from other chairs, deans, and senior staff members is that it is difficult to get professors to serve on standing and ad hoc committees, especially the less-than-glamorous ones that are nonetheless essential to the working of the institution (such as student-conduct hearing panels). Let it be known that you are willing to serve. Whenever the university issues a call for volunteers, sign up.

Another role still open is that of mentor. One of the attributes that made us successful administrators was the ability to give good career advice. Make yourself available to junior colleagues who are thinking about academic administration. Offer to talk about the role's challenges and rewards, and to share your knowledge of the institutional channels of power and decision-making.

Remember, too, that you can still exploit your campus contacts productively. I did so quite shamelessly: For years I had thought about a project that would connect faculty stars with local high-school students, and suddenly I had the time to devote to it. I also knew personally many of the professors I wanted to enlist. I pitched the idea to senior administrators with whom I'd had good working relationships; they liked it, they funded it, we piloted it successfully, and now the university's Collegiate Seminar is entering its second year.

What not to do. One of the temptations you will face is being invited to comment about your successor. Inevitably, there will be moments when you see something he or she is doing and want to intervene or register your objection.

Resist that temptation: It's now someone else's turn at the wheel. In such cases, it's best to remember the administrator's variant of the golden rule: How would you have wished your predecessor to act toward you when you were first in office?

Rarely is there only one good way to deal with a challenge, only one set of priorities to advance, or only one effective strategy to promote the unit within the university. Your successor inevitably will have his or her own style. It will be different, but different is just

that — it's not better or worse. If, or more likely when, your replacement makes a mistake, remember your own mistakes early in your tenure, and be charitable.

Above all, don't rise to the bait when someone tries to enlist you in a campaign against your successor — and I guarantee that someone will try. The overture may even come from a colleague who opposed you at every opportunity. And that should be your cue to back away from that conversation.

You now have the best job in the university. When I made a few remarks at a reception in my honor, I said that by returning to full-time teaching I now had the best job in the university, and I meant it. Now that I've been teaching again, I mean it even more.

For most of my deanship, I taught a class every semester. I found soon enough that I had a lot to learn about full-time teaching, especially in the effective use of technology. At bottom, though, despite all the changes, the profound and abiding rewards of teaching are still the same, and they still matter as much as they did early in your academic career.

Best of all, you are likely at a stage of your career, as I am, when your research agenda need satisfy no one but yourself. So now is the time to rededicate yourself to research and scholarship. Perhaps there's a long-deferred project you can revisit, or maybe a new one has suggested itself.

I was very fortunate: In the months before I stepped down, I had become intrigued by a new idea — a book about contemporary London. I now had the time for three research trips to London that helped jump-start the writing, and while the project took longer than I'd planned, it is now finished, and I'm in negotiation with a publisher.

As I look back over the ups and downs of the past two years, I realize that in returning to my faculty role I have been unbelievably fortunate — and so are you. All of us who make this transition can look forward to being surrounded by bright, energetic, and ambitious students; to engaging with interesting and dynamic colleagues; to pursuing delayed or brand-new scholarly projects; and to having opportunities to serve the university when and how we choose.

The best job in the university, indeed.

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