

Does Pausing Your Administrative Career Mean It's Over?

chroniclevitae.com/news/2290-does-pausing-your-administrative-career-mean-it-s-over



Getty Images

Last year I was given a career choice that was not, in fact, a choice. The particulars of my situation aren't important, but here's the upshot: Last March, I was sitting in a meeting with my university's new president, discussing my reappointment as dean, and it wasn't going well.

Ultimately the president offered me a graceful exit: He suggested I stay in the job for an additional year while I searched for a new deanship elsewhere. That way, I could write my own career narrative as one of continual ascent. I hadn't been ousted — I had decided to "seek a new challenge," "apply my skills to a different kind of institution," or (in the words of LeBron James, when he left Cleveland the first time) "take my talents to South Beach."

I was grateful for the option, but of course the offer wasn't purely altruistic. An additional year would give the president more time to find my successor. This was what used to be called "a gentleman's agreement" — a polite, quiet arrangement that would ensure a smooth transition for everyone involved.

I took a weekend to think about it. I knew what I was supposed to do: Accept the one-year extension and start job-hunting; onward and upward. Instead, come Monday morning, I told the president I would stay but not as dean. I opted to take a pay cut and join the faculty.

Career moves and countermoves. One thing that has long fascinated me about academe is the tension between its liberal and conservative tendencies. I don't mean politically but in the general sense — our deeply inscribed, dueling impulses toward change and preservation.

At the institutional level, for example, we pursue an expressly liberal mission (the open exchange of ideas, academic freedom, accessibility) yet are intensely attached to our bureaucracies and traditions (ponderous governance systems, the hierarchy and exclusivity of our guild). The liberal/conservative tensions play out at the individual level, too. As academics, we consciously opt out of mainstream ways of earning a living and pride ourselves on our legendary independence ("herding cats").

Yet, at the same time, it is difficult to think of a career path more regimented than an academic on the tenure track. Certain faculty members — either the best of us or the worst, depending on whom you ask — find ourselves on a similarly regimented administrative path: department chair, associate dean, dean, provost, president.

Few other careers outside the military or the priesthood offer comparable linearity and rigidity. And much like those other careers, following the approved career trajectory in academe often comes at significant personal cost. As faculty members, many of us endure long-distance relationships or forgo relationships entirely. We put off buying homes or having children until tenure is all but assured. We end up raising our children, far away from our aging parents and extended families.

Once tenured, we know the odds of changing jobs are slim. So we dig in wherever we are. We create friend-families, take out mortgages, enroll our children in schools. Some of us persuade our parents to uproot and live with or close to us. We become good neighbors and citizens, and our lives become entwined in the places where we've landed.

Some academics grow to love their adopted home, and others require a little time away from it in order to refuel. "Illinois and I have an agreement," one senior colleague said to me, early on. "Every summer I leave it for three months, and then come back ready for another year here." Another colleague, gesturing around the small but efficient airport on our way to a conference, told me, "The great thing about this place is that it's easy to leave."

By contrast, academic administrators are expected to move frequently, and many do. For a variety of reasons, deans are changing institutions more often than ever before; the average term for an academic dean is now four years, down from five years a decade ago. If you are at all serious about your administrative career, the consultants say, you need to be thinking about your next move up the ladder soon after arriving on a new campus.

"How long does a person usually stay an associate dean?" I once asked a more-senior administrator, because I had no idea at that time. He replied: "One or two terms. You don't want to stay in that job too long; people might think you're stagnating."

Family matters. I said the particulars of my situation were not important, but perhaps they are. When I took the deanship here, I was moving home to Cleveland. It was a rare opportunity in academe to combine career advancement with geographical preference.

My parents and extended family still live in the city, and I was eager for my son (then 4 years old) to spend more time with them. As a result, I had no intention of being a "short-timer" at the university, and I worked fiercely at my job to ensure that I would be able to serve at least two terms, or eight years. In reality I would've stayed in the deanship as long as the faculty supported me in the role and I remained effective.

But of course the faculty's voice is not the only one that matters, and what I hadn't anticipated was having six different supervisors — three provosts and three presidents — within four years. I hadn't anticipated that finding a toehold in those shifting sands would be such a challenge. I also hadn't anticipated my mother's pancreatic-cancer diagnosis, in 2017, and the sudden tempest of logistics and grief that terminal illness fuels.

And so last spring I found myself in a very different place than I had expected when I took the job, faced with a choice that wasn't a choice.

"We'll prepare the one-year extension contract for you," the president wrote to me after our meeting. Onward and upward, right?

Onward and sideways? The expectation that academic administrators will relocate every four or five years assumes a very specific set of attributes. It requires a candidate who either doesn't have a family or has an entirely self-sufficient one, with a partner and children who can make and remake their lives anywhere. It assumes that building trusting relationships over time is less important than a continual influx of new ideas. It assumes that major life events — the birth of a child, the death of a parent, the occurrence of a life-altering illness — need to be radically compartmentalized so as not to interfere with the needs of the institution. It assumes you will never become deeply embedded in your community.

And it assumes that you should be able to pack up your talents and life as easily as you pack a suitcase, ferrying it cheerfully to the next destination while racking up frequent-flier miles and hoping for an upgrade to business class.

What has been reaffirmed for me this past year is that I am not ready to be that person.

Four years after leaving our previous home, and 12 months after my mother's death, I am not ready to pack up our lives here and move on. I am not ready to sell our house and move my son (now 9 years old) to a new state, or commute and live apart from my son and

husband. I am not willing to give up all the things that are so wonderful about being here for the sake of maintaining a scripted professional narrative of onward and upward. At least for the next few years, I want to be here.

Some well-meaning friends have nervously sent me job postings, hoping they can inspire me to "do the right thing" for my future. "Won't this kill your career?" more than one friend has said about my unlikely decision to stay put.

My usual response: "Maybe." Because I genuinely don't know. After two decades of onward and upward, can I hit pause on my administrative career? By rejecting a gentleman's agreement, will I no longer be welcome in what is still, overwhelmingly, a boys' club? Does declining to pack my bags and move mean I will be stranded at the station forever?

The last search consultant I worked with thinks so. I like her, because she's forthright and funny, and so I asked her this question point-blank during our last phone call: "What's my shelf life, as a faculty member? How long can I do this before I'm out of the game entirely?"

"Eighteen months," she answered promptly. "Any longer and people will, you know ..."

She let that last bit hang out there, in our shared understanding that the administrative-job market has little patience for hesitation and little empathy for detours. She then gave me a helpful list of administrative-y things I should be doing right now so that I would continue to be thought of as "a leader."

I probably sound sarcastic there, but that's not my intention. She was being very helpful, in the way that search consultants know how to be. They know, keenly and deeply, how to do "onward and upward." They don't know — and few people will admit to knowing — "onward and downward," or even "onward and sideways."

Those same search firms, consultants, conferences, and networking opportunities that spring into motion at the start of an administrative career grind unceremoniously to a halt when your career ascent stops. They don't deal in creating space for introspective pausing, or advertise vocational discernment that doesn't result in a promotion. There are no conference panels dedicated to those sorts of next steps. "So Advancing in Administration Is Causing You Personal Angst and You're Rethinking Your Life Choices?" isn't a catchy title, it turns out.

The "proper" career arc. For academics, there is a whole genre of "quit lit," some of it quite moving, chronicling why they left teaching and research behind. However, there are comparatively few public stories by administrators recounting their decision to step down and what happened next. There are even fewer written by women about how academe's notions of the ideal candidate and the proper arc of an administrative career all but ensure continued homogeneity in those positions.

If my decision to step down from this deanship does mean an end to my career in administration, I suppose I am comfortable with that fact. I am a tenured professor here. I have always loved teaching and writing, and have always been profoundly grateful to have a career that allows me to do those things. Rejoining the faculty has always seemed to me to be an honor, not a demotion. And if the right opportunity comes, I hope that the institution is one that regards leadership as a quality that exists beyond a prescribed series of roles, held for an appropriate length of time.

Not long ago, I learned about the *bardo* — the Buddhist concept that describes a state of existence between death and rebirth. But I'm told that, in Buddhism, *bardos* occur all the time, not just at the end of life. They're the spaces between one thing and the next. They're uncomfortable but transformative periods that open up spaces and possibilities. They're about letting go of a thing, a state, a place, an identity.

I don't know what will come next in my career. But for now, I'm back in the familiar rhythms of writing conference-paper proposals and preparing syllabi. And I'm doing these things in a place that, for now anyway, is home.

Margaret Farrar is a professor of political science at John Carroll University and former dean of arts and sciences there