

# Leave Your Administrative Job and Find Out Who Your Friends Aren't

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I had coffee a few weeks ago with another displaced administrator at my university. Like me, he had arrived within the past decade to build something new and different. To some extent, he had succeeded. But, also like me, he had been informed that his leadership services would no longer be required beyond this year.

When he invited me, he asked if I would be uncomfortable meeting in one of the more popular campus coffee spots. "It's in the shadow of the main administration building," he warned via email.

Ever since I lost my deanship and returned to the faculty, I've been trying not to be ashamed,

as though I needed to skulk around the campus. As an administrator, I always believed that the faculty was at the heart of the university — the primary means through which an institution served students and society. Now that I'm a faculty member again, I've been telling myself I should feel comfortable anywhere on the campus.

As my colleague and I sat outside on a gorgeous spring morning, many of the people I used to work with on a daily basis walked by.

A few stopped to chat — exchanging general pleasantries and updates on health and family. Others did a quick double take when they spotted me, said hi (probably because they couldn't avoid it), and walked away. Perhaps they didn't want to engage because my presence was toxic (is failure contagious?) or awkward (what does one say in this situation?).

It's no surprise that your work relationships change when you leave the administration to return to the faculty — in general, they will be less structured by the dynamics of employment hierarchies. In theory, that should be liberating. In practice, it's always hard to develop benignly collegial relationships, let alone genuine friendships.

Some administrators return to a department where they spent decades teaching. My situation was somewhat more complicated in that I was recruited to Arizona State University as a dean, with tenure in the English department as part of the deal. So I was "returning" to a department where I had no substantial history or presence.

Either way, remember: Dealing with you will be as complicated for your faculty colleagues as it is for you to deal with them. But the rewards of reshaping and rebuilding (or in my case, building) relationships will be both professional and personal, and you may end up enjoying the social life of a faculty member more than the life you had as administrator.

I was lucky to have graduate-school friends who were on the faculty. I'm also married to a professor here. I've had a chance over the years, then, to mix the personal with the professional in ways that have enriched my life and my career. The workplace is the workplace — it's not a family — but it is a community where personal relationships can fuel great work. I took that attitude as a dean and tried to create genuine human connections around the campus. As it turned out, some of those connections weren't as real as I thought they were.

So let's get the bad part over with. Some people — typically your fellow administrators — are going to drop you.

Most administrative relationships are transactional. That doesn't prevent them from being friendly, or even genuine, to some extent. Ultimately, though, the relationships structured by administrative hierarchy — dean to dean, dean to provost's staff, dean to provost, dean to president, dean to department chair, dean to staff member, dean to professor — typically don't go any deeper or last any longer than the structure of the positions necessitates.

Even so, I believed that fellow administrators whom I thought of as friends would continue to be friends when I was no longer dean. It's easier for me to write this than it was for me to experience it. Perhaps I mistook friendly relationships for friendships. And so, as the months

went by, and I no longer saw or heard from certain "friends," my feelings were hurt.

Those shifts began even before I stopped doing my job. For a few people, the announcement that I would not be continuing as dean prompted them to drop me immediately. It went from invitations to family gatherings to instant radio silence. I'm an English professor, and I read a lot of literature, and I know that some people have always behaved that way. But it still stung. Once I had anything of value to offer in transaction, had I become more or less dead to them?

That was the bad news. The good news: You will develop other relationships in interesting and positive ways.

When I moved from faculty member to dean at my previous university, I didn't find it complicated to maintain my relationships with professors. Many of us lived in the same small neighborhood, sent our kids to the same schools, hung out at one of the two good restaurants in town on Friday and Saturday nights. "Here comes the dean," they would rib me as I walked in, and we'd occasionally talk about university politics. But my role in administration had very little to do with our friendships.

But now I have joined a department where I have little history in teaching or research. As dean, I was genuinely curious about the work that professors in my domain were doing, and I got to know many of them pretty well from that perspective. I traveled with some department chairs and went on retreats with my fellow deans, and it all felt friendly — even like friendship in a couple of cases. But the dominant mode of our conversations was always about the university.

In the past year, I've been a member of a department again. A few professors I had gotten to know a little — or who had become friends with my spouse — have gone out to lunch or for a drink with me. Sometimes the conversation falls back into "administrator/faculty mode," with me dispensing unasked-for advice or, worse, loud and obnoxious opinions about the current state of the university. Old habits die hard.

But bit by bit, we talk about the work of teaching or research in a mutually supportive, productive way. Bit by bit, I don't feel as though everything that isn't right in the college was either left unfixed by me or, worse, was the result of some misstep I made as a dean.

I have been relieved at how warmly I've been welcomed into the department. There's a bit of wariness on both sides. I still feel self-conscious walking into the building — a newly renovated home for the department, and a project I worked hard on. So when I hear grumbling about this or that aspect of the renovation, I still take it personally.

Yet the fact that I hear the grumbling at all means that everybody is treating me just the way they treat other faculty members. Indeed, my colleagues have gone out of their way to greet me at departmental gatherings — and in a manner that is noticeably less tense than when I was dean. Our relationships are mostly on the surface at this point, but that's OK. At least they're not transactional.

A coda on faculty meetings: Many kinds of campus relationships, past and present, find their concentrated form in the meeting. (Or, for that matter, in any meeting set up among colleagues.) I have been very used to running meetings — or, if not personally running them, then participating in well-structured meetings that include an established process, an agenda (however loose), and a good narrative shape with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Faculty-run meetings often aren't like that. Sometimes there is no agenda. And if there is one, it can be (to my ex-administrator's eye) poorly structured, without a thoughtful sequence of topics or even an appropriate ordering by importance. The professor running the meeting sometimes seems to defer to the sensibilities of the group rather than steer the conversation toward an actual decision. And the participants often look and feel bored, confused, self-righteous, and/or irritated. (Perhaps people in administrative meetings feel the same way but hide it more effectively.)

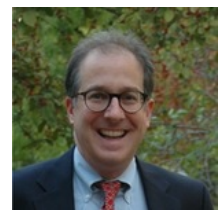
I am still experimenting with how to participate in meetings, small and large, with my colleagues. I might resolve to be on a listening tour and say nothing. Another time I might provide some factual clarification — based on my previous inside information — but withhold an opinion on what the group should decide. Or maybe I'll let loose the way I used to before I became an administrator.

In short, I'll be acting like every other faculty member around the table. The real work of meetings — creating a curriculum, discussing a hire, figuring out how to support great research — is difficult and complicated and doesn't always follow a tailored agenda. I'm back with colleagues who care deeply about the same things I care about, and I'm looking forward to working with them to make things better. Some of these folks will, I hope, even become good friends.

In my next column, I will explore the challenges of returning to research for administrators-turned-professors.

[George Justice](#) is a professor of English at Arizona State University and its former dean of humanities.

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