

Administration 101: Deciding to Lead

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Almost any administrative position in higher education today — department chair, dean of admissions, facilities manager — comes with a heavy workload and a lot of stress. Yet the average docent at your local children's museum has received far more training than those of us in campus administration. It's sink or swim: We learn by doing (or not doing) and surviving (or drowning).

A case in point: A professor I know in the social sciences stepped into a chair's job after 15 years on the faculty. She described the experience as "the worst time of my life" as she collided with a torrent of paperwork and email, budget woes, assessment reports, risk-management demands, and centrifugal forces tugging her away from her own research, teaching, and family.

Most of all, though, it was all the people problems that drove her downward and ultimately out of administration — the constant pressure from faculty colleagues (who turned on her in ways she had never experienced or foreseen) as well as from senior administrators, students, staff members, alumni, donors, and, yes, parents. She quit within a year.

What struck her most about her brief reign was how unprepared she was for the types, scale, and severity of the administrative challenges she faced.

In a new series of columns, I will explore the ins and outs of becoming a campus administrator. Obviously local

conditions vary. The tasks of, say, a dean of sciences at a major public research university are very different from those of a department chair in foreign languages at a small liberal-arts college. Yet there are also many commonalities across leadership posts in academe.

But before you even consider the admin option (within your own institution or elsewhere), you must ask yourself some tough questions to determine if you are ready to lead. That checklist is where we begin this series.

What do you bring to the job? Some aspects of faculty life — certain duties, attitudes, and experiences — will have [direct, indirect, or analogous application](#) in your new administrative post.

As a department head, for example, you will have to communicate with audiences that were not part of your experience as a scholar or a classroom teacher — such as high-school students, their parents, and senior administrators. As a professor you have already presented material effectively to different kinds of students and colleagues in different kinds of situations. The venues and audiences may not be identical from faculty to administrative life, but you can draw on what you have learned from one and apply it to the other. Good teachers often become good communicators as chairs.

So start by making a list of skills you already possess (and are good at) that you think might be helpful in an administrative role. That may be easier said than done, as most human beings are woefully inadequate at self-assessment.

I had a conversation once with a friend of 20 years who was thinking about applying for a chairmanship. When I asked him what he felt his No. 1 "people" strength was, he said, "being a good listener." I may have been a little too blunt in my attempt to be candid and helpful: "Honestly, Hank, you are a terrible listener." And he was. He talked quickly, interrupted frequently, and often jumped in to answer questions before people finished asking them. Proverbially, he loved the sound of his own voice.

While hyperlogia can be slightly irritating, most people accept it as a common affliction of the professoriate. But nobody appreciates an administrator who never lets anyone else get a word in.

So when you are listing your positive attributes, make sure they reflect reality and not self-delusion. Enlist some trustworthy and truthful colleagues to give you perspective. At the same time, force yourself to identify any personal traits you have that may be negative in the administrative context.

Another colleague who was thinking about making the jump to administration mentioned how he hated paperwork and thought that maybe as a dean he could just delegate all those pesky compliance tasks to other people. As a dean myself, I didn't quite burst into laughter, but I assured him that over the course of a typical workday (10 to 12 hours), I routinely face a tsunami of forms, reports, evaluations, budget requests, and, especially, emails. (Note: I have sent some 45,000 emails in the first three years of my deanship.)

The old wisdom of "know yourself" is a basic step toward determining whether you can serve others.

How prepared are you psychologically? There is a set of attitudes, emotions, beliefs, and character traits — beyond good listening skills — that generally help or hinder the success of any administrator. I don't believe you can be good at something only if you are born that way. Even if you lack some of the positive traits that would make you a better chair — or dean or provost — and possess some of the negative ones, there is no reason that you still might not excel if you start out aware of your handicaps and virtues.

For instance, an acquaintance of mine is widely regarded — by professors in his own department and by senior administrators — as an outstanding chair. He once described himself as "not very detail-oriented," yet he thrives in a position where, whether he is reviewing budget spreadsheets or approving equipment requests, details matter and mistakes can be costly.

So what explains the difference between his reputation and his own perception?

Well, when he became chair, he realized that he would have to force himself to be systematic and deliberate in approaching any project, planning any venture, or inspecting any document. He slows down, reviews details carefully, and gets through all his paperwork with a high rate of accuracy. In short, he taught himself to be detail-oriented.

That said, there are some leg irons that are hard to break, even by concerted will and effort. If you bring to the job of administrator a thin skin, a short temper, or a general lack of interest in anyone's work but your own, you are probably headed toward personal dissatisfaction and a short tenure in the post. (The people who report to you won't be very happy, either, and will be glad to see you go.)

In general, I would recommend holding off on an administrative post until you become a full professor. My own research productivity has crashed since I became a dean, but it started dropping earlier when I accepted the chair's position. Because of my travel schedule, I can guest-lecture but am unable to commit to teaching a whole course. Don't take the job unless you are emotionally ready and willing to reduce the other parts of your career (teaching, research) and augment your commitment to service.

Is your family on board with this change? And do they know what they are in for?

A fellow dean once told me that he never would have taken the job had he still had children at home. He couldn't have brought himself to miss so many dance recitals, family dinners, and Little League games. And what about the other intangible factors of administration that can impinge on your extraprofessional commitments — whether the latter refers to marriage, elder care, hobbies, or anything else that isn't the job?

Your work character is the independent variable here. I know administrators who are obsessive-compulsive. They stress out over every faculty imbroglio and put too much time into every assessment report. They attempt a work-life balance but tend to place too many lead weights on the work side. Other administrators are responsive to their constituents, finish their reports on time, and yet don't abandon their families. The job can desiccate one person and enliven another.

The decision about whether all of the nonwork aspects of your life will survive your commitment to an administrative track is, of course, not yours alone to make. More than one campus official has served only a few years because a spouse or partner rebelled — not only against the long hours in the office but also against all the stresses and distractions.

And not only human partners and dependents may feel that way. Years ago, I was talking with a fellow academic who, like me, was a passionate cat-lover. He remarked that he could never take a position that would keep him at the office late or require a lot of travel, because "Mittens would forbid it."

What are your motivations? Another vital set of queries revolves around why, exactly, you would like to be an administrator. You are probably at least vaguely aware of the negatives. But what positively motivates you to become a chair, dean, or beyond?

To echo Samuel Johnson, there is no shame in acknowledging that money has a role in your decision making. Just keep in mind: The actual amount of extra compensation that comes with an administrative title can vary widely. At some institutions, a department chair might bring you a few thousand dollars extra and release time from teaching one course. On other campuses, the salary supplement might be more like \$40,000 a year, plus research stipends, graduate-student support, and teaching buyouts.

Using power for good purpose is also a fine motive. Laugh along with all the jokes about joining the dark side, and then ignore them. Becoming a department chair doesn't turn you into Tolkien's Sauron. Most of the administrators I respect consider power to be only a sort of lever to help solve bigger problems than they could as a faculty member

without an administrative title.

But if you are one of those people looking for glory and public appreciation for your administrative good deeds, such motivations will leave you frustrated and disappointed. A wise dean once told me, "Ninety percent of the good you do no one will know about." Oh, my, was he correct. Because of confidentiality rules and because most good administrators don't hold a news conference every time they simply do their jobs, much of what we accomplish is behind the scenes and nearly invisible. In my own years as an administrator, I have found dozens of cases in which someone who held my office previously had accomplished some great task that only a few people ever knew about.

So don't get into administration if your ego demands constant gratification — or even simple gratitude. People you help individually won't always show their appreciation (in fact, some will think, "Well, I deserved it. Why should I thank you?"). And you probably won't hear a word of thanks when you do something as an administrator that benefits your program, its mission, or its students in general but is not seen as a special favor by any one person.

Within the administrative ranks, you will find, to borrow a phrase from the comic playwright Plautus, God's plenty from virtue to trash. Yes, there is a subset of people who go into administration purely as an expression of their spite toward humankind. Their lack of integrity is matched only by their will to power. On the other hand, those with benevolent intentions can accomplish much, and our trade desperately needs positive managers and leaders — people who are actually good at managing and leading.

If you believe you have what it takes then, by all means, join the administrative ranks. Just go in with a sober, self-aware, evidence-driven understanding of what you will bring to the position, and what you can expect from it.