

Beware of the Curse Of Small Things

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In a [previous article](#), I wrote about the challenges and rewards of chairing an academic department and offered my postchair analysis of my performance. In this essay, I talk about the skill set needed for drama-free delivery of your curriculum and reasonably happy colleagues.

We all know the saying “the devil is in the details.” It means that sometimes the success or failure of projects, careers, parties or performances hinges on some detail that was either poorly planned or neglected. Once I took an exam to be hired by a large corporation that used bubble sheets. I brought with me, as instructed, two pencils for the task. I carefully selected them, and they were freshly sharpened and gleaming. If only I had thought to check whether they were No. 2 pencils. The proctors for the exam, who were also human resources executives, gave me that tsk-tsk look as they handed me the stubby in-house pencils. Ultimately, the wrong leads dashed my dreams of carrying a platinum card by American Express and cruising in a European luxury automobile.

What a blessing. Instead, I found my way to the professoriate, where I could abandon concerns about the little things. I think, and write, about *big* things. Little things be damned. I love being a professor. I can read as many books as I can fit into the day. Tender humans come into my life every year, and over the next four years, I watch them try on their adult selves. Then I get to celebrate the unveiling of the first model of the grown-up they will become. As I greet the parents and tell them what I know about their offspring, I am grateful for my small role in the production of said young adult. Grand stuff.

What I do not have to do as a regular faculty member is order office equipment, review budgets, schedule courses, sign student forms or shoulder any of the other duties that make academic life work. The chair and departmental administrators take care of all of that for me. Yay!

But when you become department chair, you have to shoulder those kinds of duties and more. You have to sign numerous documents -- graduation audits, major declaration forms, purchase invoices. Working out class schedules is not difficult, but it is tedious. Minutes, hours and days go by as you run as fast as you can on the paperwork treadmill. Make no mistake -- taking care of those duties matters.

Here is the fundamental challenge for a department chair: you cannot trust any process to go smoothly for you. Yes, you sent in the course schedule with all of the preferred times for your faculty members. It comes back to you with many errors. You return a corrected schedule, and when it comes back again, you don't check it because you are confident that everything is golden. After all, you cannot insult the scheduling czar by sending back the same corrections as before.

But as registration begins, your faculty members soon learn that their course schedules are not as ordered. Yikes! Caterwauling ensues. You wonder whether irate colleagues are going to jump you in the parking lot. You stammer through excuses and keep saying, “I'll fix it,” as your colleagues complain, “Why is scheduling so hard for you?” and “I told you about my weekly Pilates class *weeks* ago.” Ouch! I suggest that you examine iterations of the teaching schedule carefully. And ask a colleague and the administrative staff to proofread for you. Share the blame!

And now we come to Professor Plainspoken's second maxim for chairing an academic department: teaching schedules you must handle with extreme care. Check, double-check and triple-check. And always beware. Mistakes in scheduling are Satan's tools -- for ensuring that you always look like a fool.

Also, when managing teaching schedules and room assignments, never trust that a single communiqué will do. Communicate with the registrar's office verbally after you send each draft of the course plan. Using two forms of communication should help to guarantee that the correct information is received and understood. The curse of small things is that tiny things, when they go wrong, are one *big thing*. Unfortunately, the big thing then becomes a key

indicator of your competence to your department colleagues. It is understandable, since it is usually the small things that make a difference in the way you spend your days. One or two small stumbles are forgotten -- more than a few, especially when you are a nontraditional chair (e.g., a woman of color), seems especially egregious. In time, the curse of small things lifts as you determine the most efficient and foolproof way of getting things done.

We may blame the curse for most of our stresses. Someone once said, "The best way to reduce stress is to stop screwing up." I think I repeated that one to myself every day. Screwups are inevitable. The key is finding ways to avoid beating yourself up about them.

Would-be department chairs need what I often lacked in my position as chair: perspective. Did anyone ever end up teaching a horrible schedule because of a mistake I made? No. But they almost endured an awful schedule. The almost was enough for me to keep a running tally on my bureaucratic near misses. I was treating myself like an air-traffic controller. A near miss was cause for concern about my fitness for the job. I wanted to execute every duty with precision and perfection. Ha! My dentist, who would spend hours reshaping a tooth after a filling, told me a patient said to him after being in his chair for hours, "Perfectionism is the enemy of good enough" (his modification of the saying "The perfect is the enemy of the good").

Perfectionism. It's the hobgoblin of marginalized people. It is also the result of parents, who -- in their effort to inspire you to do your best -- dwelled on your mistakes far more than your successes. I am impatient with myself when learning anything new. I want to get it right *right now!*

When you add to the mix of perfectionism and impatience the competitiveness of academe, it is a nasty brew. Somewhere along the way, I got the idea that being kind and patient with myself was self-indulgent. I am unlearning this now. Should you become chair, you cannot afford *not* to be kind and patient with yourself.

And now, the last of the maxims for today from Professor Plainspoken: to yourself you must be kind and nurture a healthy state of mind. The curse of small things you can prevent, and your days as chair you will never lament.