

Can You Really Restart Your Research After Years in Administration?

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George Justice

Professor of English at [Arizona State University at Tempe](#)



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When I was offered my first full-time administrative job in 2006 — as an assistant dean in the graduate school — there were two naysayers to whom I paid close attention: my wife and a prominent senior colleague.

My wife wanted me to decline the job because she foresaw what it would be like to care for two toddlers with me gone all the time.

The senior colleague was John Miles Foley, an expert on oral literary traditions. Hearing that I would have to forgo a yearlong research leave to write my second book if I accepted the assistant dean's job, he urged me not to do it: "If you go into administration now you will be making a mistake. There are a lot of people who can do that work, and it should be done by senior members of the faculty. Now is the time for you to build a real career in scholarship."

I took the job, declined the leave, and never wrote that book.

Last summer, I returned to the faculty (not by choice) after 11 years in academic administration, eight of them as dean. As I prepared to restart my research, I had to admit that Foley was right: Becoming a dean had derailed the "real career" he'd wanted me to pursue.

A year later, my scholarship — focusing on 18th-century British literature, women's writing, and the development of the book-publishing industry — has finally begun to take shape after a slow start. It feels like it has a more central and urgently felt role in my professional life.

As my many distinguished colleagues at Arizona State and elsewhere will attest, it's hard to do the research and writing that leads to a genuine contribution to the world's knowledge. It's not completely clear to me that I'll be able to do that — you don't lose 11 years of a scholarly career and simply pick up where you left off. Every day I am confronting doubts and fears even as I try to think long-term about my research. If I am lucky enough to work for 20 more years, what will those years look like? How will my intellectual work matter?

The challenges vary by field. Some deans in the lab sciences are prescient enough to "keep their research going" — sometimes with grants, sometimes with limited internal funding for lab space and personnel. A return to the faculty for those who have maintained the skeleton of a research operation might only mean ramping it up and fleshing it out. Lab science typically requires a collaborative approach, working with a range of research partners, including other faculty members, industry partners, postdoctoral fellows, graduate students, staff scientists, and undergraduates. The transition can be technically daunting but won't necessarily present an existential challenge to the former dean's identity.

For a dean-turned-humanities-researcher, the technical part is easy. Most humanists were trained to do research on our own, with books and other media as our objects of study and the library as our laboratory. With the expansion of online databases and the development of door-to-door delivery service from libraries, some of us can do our research anywhere, on our own. There is greater freedom and opportunity for someone doing humanities research now than there was a decade ago.

But I'm not used to doing scholarship, and I fear that my research skills have atrophied. Even worse, I fear that I have been so coddled by years of assistance from a super-competent administrative team that I've grown unaccustomed to working on my own. Can I still do it? I need to find not only internal motivation but organizational structure.

I've spent much of the past year figuring out that I can't travel back in time and pick up the research career that was gaining steam before my turn to administration. Instead, I've been trying to learn how to use both the good and bad parts of my administrative experience in my work as a scholar.

One way I've rethought my research has been through collaboration. The team approach to being a dean allowed me to rely on others more than I ever did as a faculty member and a scholar. Was there a way that I could bring collaboration to my research?

I haven't been a stranger to working with colleagues. As I was putting materials in for tenure, many years ago, a colleague and I signed a contract for an editorial project transcribing and annotating one volume in a Cambridge University Press series on the letters of the English author Samuel Richardson. Fifteen years later — and a decade after its due date — some new collaborators and I are finally finishing that manuscript and getting it ready for submission.

It's a source of embarrassment now that I was so wrapped up in my day-to-day administrative work that I didn't do my share of the work. But in the past year, this project has been a lifeline. I've had the chance to work with brilliant collaborators — one near me and one in England — and the research itself, which is detail-oriented, has felt satisfying.

Note to self: I like working with people, and I like detail. Editorial projects involve both of those things. Realizing that made me enthusiastic about rebooting a scholarly journal I co-edited, called *The Eighteenth Century Novel*, with a valued colleague and friend. We've found a new publisher, and we are ready to roll.

During my time as dean I continued to teach, read, and think about Jane Austen, one of the central literary figures of the period of literature I study. My spouse (Devoney Looser) is a leading expert on Austen, and so I've had a great opportunity to keep up with the field even as I worked in administration. I wasn't sure I was ready to write about Austen myself (and I'm still not sure). There's so much outstanding scholarship on her that it seems daunting to believe I would have something new to contribute.

But I've enjoyed going to conferences, and the annual meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America has been one of the most welcoming events I've experienced — both for scholars and for fans. Knowing that, I applied to give a talk at the meeting this fall. My proposal was accepted. I need to finish the presentation before classes start in August, and I know it had better be good.

Having a deadline has helped. I'm used to meeting deadlines from my years in administration. And presenting at conferences seems like a good way for an ex-dean to get back into scholarship. You have to do the work to present, and then you can decide whether it's good enough to submit for publication afterward. I'm excited about the paper. But if it turns out badly, only I and 50 or so people in the audience will know.

Ultimately, though, neither my editorial projects nor a conference paper for the Jane Austen Society of North America will fulfill expectations of my colleagues for a senior faculty member in my field. I don't want junior colleagues looking at me as "dead wood" and senior colleagues snickering as I walk down the hallway.

English departments expect the production of single-authored original books. I know that I need to write a book — and I want to. But contemplating the significant contribution a scholarly book has to make — and the work it will take to write one — has been terrifying.

Paul Fussell, the eminent writer and essayist, once told me that he formulated the germ of *The Great War and Modern Memory* (which made a number of lists of the best nonfiction books of the 20th century) while browsing the stacks at Rutgers University, simply by being open to inspiration. I'm going to do my own browsing over the next year, but in the meantime I've been itching to put fingers to keyboard for more than Facebook status updates.

The advice I always gave to faculty members was: Work on what you understand; work on what you care about.

I know the job of dean inside and out, from the vantage point of two different positions at two different institutions. And that work still matters to me, very much.

The inspiration for my manuscript — tentatively titled *How to be a Dean*, and set to be published in spring of 2019 by the Johns Hopkins University Press — came in a conversation with Greg Britton, editorial director of the press, this past February. Possessed by the idea, I sketched an outline over the weekend along with 20 pages of writing. Bolstered by two anonymous peer reviews of the proposal, the press contracted the book and pushed me to complete a draft of a short volume by May 1.

The book will be both descriptive and opinionated. I hope it will offer useful advice for sitting deans, for would-be deans, and for anyone interested in academic leadership. The full manuscript is now undergoing three more anonymous peer reviews. If the book stinks, I'll know about it before it's published, and I will — unless the book really stinks and the press decides not to move forward — have the opportunity to revise it with the best advice my peers can offer.

The lesson I'm taking from all of this for former administrators who return to the faculty: Even if you don't want to do research on the things you actively worked on as an administrator, try to make positive use of those years. You might initially believe that time in administration is "wasted" from the vantage point of your research. But think again. You've spent a lot of your time in administration thinking about research and teaching, about academic culture and its effects on students. What you did matters, even if you ended up being rejected by your bosses. How can you transform your administrative work into a new contribution?

In my next column, I will discuss my forthcoming return to the classroom, the heart of a faculty member's work.

George Justice is a professor of English at Arizona State University and its former dean of humanities.



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George Justice, May 21, 2018

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