

# Administration 101: Good Administrators Care About ‘How It Will Look’

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## Advice



Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By David D. Perlmutter July 22, 2018

As dean, I traveled to San Francisco a few years ago with most of my college’s faculty members and doctoral students for a national conference in our field. I didn’t rent a car, because everything on the agenda — leadership meetings and donor visits — was within walking distance of our hotel. Then a major donor from a faraway suburb called and wanted to meet near his home.

Unfortunately, the local rental dealerships were sold out of standard vehicles, but — "good news" — a luxury convertible was available for the same price. I pondered for a moment and declined. Why? I was worried about the optics. That is: how it would look if people from my

campus saw me driving away from the hotel like some movie star, thereby confirming prejudices about rich, privileged deans.

Was I being silly, even paranoid?



## Admin 101

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In this series, David D. Perlmutter writes about pursuing a career in academic administration and about surviving and thriving as a leader.

Maybe. But surviving and thriving as an administrator in higher education today depend on how you are perceived by numerous constituencies, especially the faculty. That's why this month, the [Admin 101 series](#) — on how to become, and succeed as, an administrator in higher education — turns to the optics of leadership. After all, the ability to read people is fundamental to good administration. Here are ways to hone that skill.

**Stay in touch with professors.** In [an April essay](#) in *The Chronicle*, I encouraged academic leaders to stay meaningfully connected to faculty members. To quote myself: "Too many administrators, the higher in rank they go, have daily dealings only with staff, alumni, and other administrators." It's easy to lose sight of what it's like to be a faculty member.

Certainly the time demands on the average department chair or dean are substantial — endless emails and hours of fund raising, not to mention budgets, planning, risk management, and everybody's favorite, personnel issues.

With all of that, you still must make time for faculty members. Attend research talks, sit down to discuss an assistant professor's new project, create venues to meet faculty members outside of formal meetings, welcome impromptu hallway chats (the old standby: "What are you working on?"). Let faculty members see you are a person, even a quasi colleague, not just a suit behind a desk.

**Be present and accessible — when you can.** The external lodestones for administrators, especially deans and presidents (and not a few chairs with major fund-raising obligations), are many and increasing. Those commitments almost always lure you off campus. Most people on

campus understand that you can't be in your office with an open door, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., but there is a limit to how much absence they will accept. That is why you should:

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- Stay in touch even if you are on the road. I give my cellphone number to anyone and everyone at my institution. I say, "Text or call me any time if you need something." And I try not to leave an email unanswered for more than 24 hours.
- Trust your instincts. Not everyone will tell you when an emergency is an emergency. The meek, "no rush" inquiry from one faculty member might be the one you need to follow up on instantly, while the all-caps battle cry from another might be worth setting aside for a bit so that the sender can calm down. In time, you will learn whose crisis really is one.
- Make sure your staff members aren't overprotective. A former dean discovered that his assistant, wishing to be helpful, guarded his calendar zealously and warded off most faculty attempts to see him with a "Sorry, he's too busy; how about two months from now?" The dean's image took a corresponding nose dive. Tell staff members you want to know who is trying to reach you.

**Make sure they know you care.** The Romans recognized that truth thousands of years ago. The historian Pliny the Younger noted how the emperor won affection from his troops by recognizing, praising, and rewarding them as individuals. To be regarded as an effective leader, you must be able to both: (a) inspire a group and (b) make the members feel as if you cared about each of them personally.

That's why the chairs, deans, and presidents with the highest approval ratings from their various constituents tend to be people who share the credit and convey a personal touch. A good place to start: Learn and remember people's names and their CV highlights. Sincerely appreciate their contributions without forced platitudes. Show that you care about them and their personal issues and problems.

But be genuine. In a campus setting, you are dealing with highly intelligent, sensitive, and perceptive people. Empathy that is rote, strained, or affected is worse than showing no interest at all.

**Remember: Perceptions vary by listener and location.** It would be wonderful if everyone who heard something negative about you would come by your office, lay out the evidence, and talk it out respectfully. In reality, you cannot explain your every action or statement in detail to everyone. People will form impressions of you based on drive-by viewings. Some will repeat things you either never said or didn't say in the way they think you did.

To earn a break on the little things, you must work hard to win trust on the big things. The complication: Local culture will dictate different actions from campus to campus.

A friend who has twice been a dean described the following scenario: At her first deanship, the college had a substantial budget for renovation, and she was surprised when professors recommended the dean's office as a top priority for a makeover. The dean's office, they

insisted, "is a reflection on all of us, and we want it to be impressive." At her second deanship, however, the provost strongly advised against sprucing up the dean's office, because professors would react negatively. She realized the cultural difference implicit in this small yet significant gesture: One campus preferred to showcase the dean's office, while the other emphasized egalitarianism.

Another realm of cultural sensitivity is your tone, voice, and manner. I started my career in the Northeast, where it was quite common to speak quickly, talk over people, and use emphatic hand gestures. Indeed, "talking slow" was taken as a sign of dullness.

In contrast, in the Deep South state where I subsequently worked for 10 years, those "Yankee" habits were often taken as aggressive and insulting. I learned to restrain my gestural enthusiasm, lower my voice, and pace my conversation. Now, in Texas, people generally talk louder, but rapidity and gesturing are still anomalous. What enhances your image in one culture may undermine you, or be seen as toxic, in another.

Academic leaders who focus too much on image are probably too shallow to be effective. But being aware of how you, your words, and your actions will look to others is not vanity — it's common sense.

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