In praise of secondments

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One academic's journey in search of new perspectives.

What you are about to read is an argument for inviting more academics, and academic administrators, to second themselves for periods of time to new roles within and beyond the university. It's a reflection on three mid-career adventures that taught me more than I bargained for. Returning now to teach tax law and policy at York University's Osgoode Hall Law School, I realize just how much I've learned on the road and how it is energizing my work as a faculty member. Paradoxically, I'm also keenly aware of what I missed by being away. Out of this strange mix, a few ideas are emerging about why we should promote a stronger culture of secondments in academia.

Phase one: Administration

In 2011, after 20 years as a law professor, I took the plunge into full-time administration as associate vice-president, research, at York. Working with scholars from many disciplines was a reward in itself. But, it also turned out to be a form of comparative study into the distinctive research cultures across the university – their diverse modes of inquiry and concepts of achievement. In the process, I came to see my own discipline of legal studies more clearly, both its special insights and its blind spots. The job made it harder to publish for a while, but I came out of it with some new research questions and a wider set of scholarly interests.

Being virtually absent from the classroom did take a toll, however. Without a solid connection to teaching, it's impossible not to lose touch to some degree with the daily experience of being a faculty member or a student. Removing colleagues with leadership responsibilities entirely from teaching for extended periods deprives us of one of the most fundamental sources of data, and inspiration, for our work within the academy. I think it's one factor behind a growing sense of two solitudes within universities, one that imperils trust, communication and, ultimately, empathy.

The division between faculty and administration is painful for many of us. Attempts to talk about it too often devolve into partisan blame on both sides. I've seen the impossible demands on the time of administrators and I believe their work is critical and often underappreciated. So, I want to be clear: I am not laying blame at their feet. But, I wonder how the conversation within universities might change if we fostered a culture in which senior academic leaders taught on a regular basis.

We could be creative about the form this takes – maybe co-teaching, carving out a few days for an intensive course, or leading an evening seminar. A more ambitious goal would be to second our academic leaders back into full-time teaching for a term once every few years. Working directly with students feeds the academic soul and keeps us connected to their points of view. It also generates meaningful discussion with colleagues, and good ideas about how we can best innovate and respond to a changing context for postsecondary education.

Phase two: Government

While on leave, I accepted a part-time role as special counsel in Ontario's Ministry of Finance. As a fiscal policy scholar, I wanted to see up close how budgets and tax law are made. Entering a brand new workplace reminded me what it's like to be a novice among experts – what students must feel each time they start a new program or course.

Fortunately, the Ontario Public Service takes professional development very seriously. Colleagues went out of their way to teach and mentor me. I was struck by the range of interesting career paths in government and delighted to learn from some of my own former law students.
At a macro level, I saw why policy-making is such a complex endeavour. Governments must try to anticipate how a

proposed intervention will impact myriad interests, some obvious and others less so. Unintended consequences lurk around every corner. Potential conflicts between different regulatory frameworks can only be averted through deep collaboration across a vast organization. The public servants I met were creative problem-solvers, eager to discuss ideas and emerging research. I saw that academic work can influence their thinking, especially when it is presented succinctly for a generalist audience.

As researchers, our job is to gain deep insight into a chosen field over years of study. By contrast, policy-makers are more likely to work laterally across many different files. My time in government convinced me more than ever of the value of writing opinion pieces, blog posts and other short essays, as a way of translating in-depth research for the benefit of decision-makers. It also gave me a host of new examples for the classroom, to help students grasp how the material they are learning plays out in practice, and why law in action so often diverges from law on the books.

In all these ways, my short stint as a government lawyer was radically mind-broadening. It leads me to argue that there should be more opportunities for academics to jump the fence and spend time in another sector, as a form of learning exchange that can benefit both the host organization and the faculty member, and ultimately the university and its students.

One exciting initiative to watch is the Canadian Science Policy Fellowship. Launched by Mitacs in 2016, the program seconds academics to work with federal agencies on specific policy projects for a one-year period. It's a promising model that could be expanded to a wider range of disciplines and policy areas, and to the provinces as well. (*Editor's note*: see our news story on the Mitacs fellowships.)

Phase three: Institutional exchange

In mid-2015, I got a call to step in as interim dean of the then two-year-old Bora Laskin Faculty of Law at Lakehead University. One of the most unexpected and most rewarding experiences I've had, this was also a crash course in many subjects:

- Issues facing northern communities around resource development and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians;
- The critical role that smaller universities play in local economies, and why it would be a mistake to design higher education policy only around the needs of larger, urban institutions;
- The excitement of being in a start-up program full of fresh ideas and entrepreneurial energy, and the challenges of breaking into a field of established players.

Working in Thunder Bay brought home to me how much place matters. It gave me new perspective on the cultural specificity of my own thinking as a law professor from Toronto, a non-Indigenous, urban academic. My times spent abroad on sabbatical had been wonderful but more itinerant and centred on my own research. This was more akin to a faculty exchange, and it taught me different things.

Secondments and exchanges will not be everyone's cup of tea. And, exploring in these ways does distract for a period of time from the fundamental scholarship that the academy is uniquely designed to foster. But, for those of us who have the itch, it can also yield valuable lessons and insights that we bring back home to our programs and our research. For those academics who want to venture out, and those administrators who would like to venture back into the classroom, I say let's open more doors. Our universities will be all the better for it.

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