

# Advice for New Administrators

[chroniclevitae.com/news/1513-advice-for-new-administrators](http://chroniclevitae.com/news/1513-advice-for-new-administrators)



August 16, 2016

With Support From



*Image: Office Space (1999)*

Whenever I teach “Introduction to University Life” to freshmen, I ask them at the end of the term to think about what advice they would give their rookie selves, now that they have weathered their first semester in college. It’s a revealing exercise and I share the results with the next class to demonstrate that everyone struggles with this transition. The same goes for a very different transition — from faculty member to administrator.

With a new academic year fast approaching, I’d like to provide a similar reflection based on my experiences both as a department chair and a dean (though I’m a few years past my first year in administration!). This advice is both for those finishing their first year in an administrative position and for those preparing to make the transition.

In other words, file this under: things I wish someone had said to me when I made the switch.

**Perspective: It gets easier.** In the first year of an administrative job, nearly every task seems daunting because you probably haven’t done it before. Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Cultivate a network of people who you can call or email when you need a quick answer to a question (I have my go-to guy in the registrar’s office on speed dial).

You’ll get better at certain tasks once you’ve practiced them a few times. The first time I had to plan a departmental course schedule felt like I was trying to solve a Rubik’s cube — balancing faculty requests against programmatic needs, while at the same time considering administrative fiat on which days and times of the week that courses

should be offered. The second time around? Much easier.

Further, you'll get used to certain kinds of problems. For example, when I first became a department chair, I found it stressful and exhausting to handle student complaints about faculty members. By the time I reached my fifth year as chair, I took such cases no less seriously, but my accumulated experience made handling them decidedly less onerous and vexing. Now that I am a dean I have learned that there is a nearly predictable cycle to these complaints. As the semester draws toward finals week, for example, the number of complaints grows as students get stressed and demanding. I try to de-escalate the situation, and handle their complaints in a way that acknowledges that this is a difficult time in the term for them.

**Isolation: It can be a little bit lonely moving from professor to administrator.** Even the geography of most offices reinforces your isolation. Administrative offices tend to be set apart. If you came out of a faculty culture where doors were open and people dropped in on each other (as I did), you may suddenly find yourself feeling cut off. That will suit some personalities, but it didn't suit mine. So I've had to make a point of walking around the office, dropping in on colleagues, and making sure I have occasional lunch dates.

**Apologize: Don't be afraid to admit mistakes.** Once you are "in charge" as a new administrator, you may feel reluctant to acknowledge your mistakes or apologize when you get something wrong. Apologizing, after all, has negative cultural connotations that equate it with weakness.

But as dean, I have apologized to a staff member (for forgetting to include her in the loop when I made a policy change), to a colleague (for missing an appointment because I failed to put it on my calendar), and to a student (for being wrong about an advising suggestion). When I first became chair, however, I was reluctant to acknowledge such mistakes because I thought it would compromise my authority. But I quickly learned that I gained nothing from making a mistake and then trying to cover it up, excuse it, or pretend it didn't happen.

Nowadays, I own my mistakes, apologize, move forward, and try to learn from them. Doing so does not seem to have harmed my relationships with colleagues or students.

**Delegating: Learn how to share the load.** We all know that we can't do it all, yet we consistently behave as if we can. Call it micromanaging, call it control issues, but whatever you do, call an end to it. I doubt any of us need more to do.

What you can delegate will vary widely, from position to position, and from campus to campus. But generally, speaking, you need to let go of the stuff of day-to-day operations — like scheduling meetings and handling budget transactions. You now have a staff that can manage those kinds of tasks.

Chances are that, as a faculty member, what moved you toward administration was the experience of chairing a major committee or managing a big project. Once you are a chair or a dean, you need to put other people in charge of those committees and projects and have them report back to you. Exploring a new curricular initiative or student outreach project? Delegate it to a standing committee or appoint an ad-hoc group to work on it. The corollary to delegation, however, is accountability. You need to follow through and make sure that delegated tasks are completed.

Another reason to delegate is that your colleagues need to be both cognizant of, and invested in, the work of the department. If you do everything — magically and behind the scenes — you risk creating a culture of disengagement where faculty members don't know, for example, the work that goes into identifying and recruiting students for the departmental honor society, or the logistics of organizing an event with a visiting speaker. And what happens when you step down as chair? There will be a profound lack of institutional knowledge and memory that will make your successor's job that much more difficult.

As we know from the classroom, the more students participate, the more they are invested in their education. So, too, with faculty. Delegating will help to create a participatory and engaged department culture.

**Advocacy: Have your own back.** One thing I learned early on was that no one was necessarily going to advocate for me as an administrator. As department chairs and deans it is our job to advocate for others — whether students, faculty, or staff. So it's easy to lose sight of our own needs.

But you do need to take care of yourself as well. Don't be afraid to ask for what you need: a bigger budget, a summer stipend, a graduate assistant. That lesson was driven home to me by a conversation I had with a colleague. She was disappointed that her successor as department chair was given a generous contract for summer work. But he had received it because he had asked for it. I asked this colleague if she had ever made such a request while she was chair and she said no. You can't get what you don't ask for. So be your own advocate.

**Emergencies: There are very few things that can't wait 24 hours.** With a few exceptions, there really aren't any emergencies in higher-education administration. You don't need to check your email after you've left the office for the day. You don't need to lose sleep over a student complaint or a faculty grievance. It's OK to take a vacation day.

I've learned many other lessons over the course of my administrative career, but those are the main ones that continue to serve me well and work in a variety of settings. What advice would you offer to early-career administrators? Share your suggestions in the comments below.