ADMINISTRATION AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Universities and colleges have always had administrators, and these administrators are frequently drawn from the ranks of full-time faculty. A typical faculty member is not necessarily trained to be an administrator, so often there is quite a bit of "on-the-job learning." Here, we highlight the positive aspects of administration. Not surprisingly, many of these positive experiences emanate from the learning opportunity that administration provides.

INTRODUCTION

There is no question that administrative work takes up a lot of time. Very often, academics choose the career path that they do to avoid the kinds of tasks that accompany administration, including paper work, budgeting, scheduling, communicating with non-academic publics, personnel problems, and others. Of course, academic institutions cannot exist without administrators, and faculty members often prefer to be led by people of their "own kind" -- fellow academics. Thus, at some point in their career, just about every academic is requested to take on an administrative task of some kind or other. We assume here that the disadvantages of such positions are well understood. Thus, we concentrate on exploring some of the positive attributes associated with saying, "yes," when asked to serve.

"Administration" is a very broad term. It could include such activities as serving as: a) a dean; b) an associate dean; c) a vice president or president of a university or college; d) a department head; e) an associate department head; f) a faculty senate member or president; g) an editor; h) an officer of a national organization; or others. The co-authors have held more than seven such positions, and the comments here are designed to reflect those experiences.

ADMINISTRATION AS A NEW CAREER PATH

Academic careers take professors to a new place. Many join the ranks of the academy because they enjoy pondering and celebrating the many complexities of a situation. Administrators get to do some of this; but, eventually, they also must make a decision. In this way, administrators sharpen their decision-making skills on a day-to-day basis, in a way that many academics do not. In addition, administrators must demonstrate leadership skills; and administration provides many opportunities for learning about this activity and process.
Administrators often come into contact with professors from areas that are far afield from their own area of expertise. This contact presents an excellent opportunity for learning. Every academic discipline has its own traditions and strengths. Members of disparate disciplines look at the world in very different ways, and they do things in their own unique ways. In this sense, administration can be a broadening experience as the administrator learns both substance and style from members of these "foreign" disciplines. Too often, academics live in "silos" (or ivory towers) where they do not naturally interact with those in other disciplines. Administration brings academics from many disciplines together and encourages the cross-fertilization of ideas and methods.

Administrators are often called on to speak publicly and to deal with members of the press. They have a unique opportunity to write delicate memos that also communicate effectively with a variety of interest groups (e.g., faculty, students, higher levels of administration) about complex issues. All of these are skills which can be brought back to the academic's core discipline. For instance, exadministrators report that their communication skills -- both written and spoken -- improve as part of their "on-the-job learning." Some administrators are called upon to deal with the popular press in ways that typical academics do not. Thus, public relations skills are sharpened and honed.

So far, we have discussed administration as a "temporary" assignment. Many administrative appointments have a limited time frame, after which the administrators return to their original academic endeavor. In some instances, the administrators enjoy the career change so much that they remain in such posts for many years. Here again, administration offers a unique opportunity. Administrators have a chance to make "their mark" on institutions of higher learning. In many instances, it is this opportunity that attracts academics to administration in the first place. In brief, some academics find it appealing to make a permanent shift into administration. Once such a commitment is made, it is sometimes difficult to find a way back. For instance, at the end of a multi-year term as editor, is quite common for ex-editors to ask themselves, "Now, what was it that I was doing again? What is my research stream?"

**A BRIEF EXAMPLE**

Here, we offer a brief example to make concrete some of the previous points. Let us consider the field of art. Art professors emphasize the visual world. They emphasize creativity and emphasize the importance of process. Art professors have natural overlaps with other disciplines (e.g., engineering, architecture, business) through their focus on design; but often the nature of these overlaps is not apparent without direct contact. For instance, the knowledge that art professors have about design is very close the focus of advertising and marketing professors. This is especially true today with the increased importance of electronic commerce and the World Wide Web (e.g., the design of home pages). On the one hand, art professors can learn a lot by interacting with professors from related fields (e.g., architecture). Art professors and architecture professors speak the same language. But, they do have slightly different perspectives.
On the other hand, art professors can learn from interacting with professors from radically different fields. As one example, art professors who specialize in studio work (e.g., painters, sculptors) do not necessarily do a lot of writing as part of their scholarship. Thus, administration provides an opportunity for art professors to explore a new medium. In fact, there are instances of art professors, who serve a period of time in administration, returning later to their scholarship with a new focus that can involve writing as well as studio work.

CONCLUSION

To date, universities have not found a way to function without administrators. Sometimes, faculty members view administrative work as a burden that someone (or someone else) must shoulder. Administration involves a lot of work that academics are not necessarily trained to do. At the same time, administration offers opportunities for learning. We describe some of those opportunities here. Our discussion is meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive.