**If Only I Knew Then …**

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A veteran administrator reflects on truisms he wished he had known early on

Abstract:

The article presents a series of reflections and maxims by the author regarding his experiences as a college administrator, highlighting several pieces of advice regarding aspects of academic life and work. Issues mentioned include the nature of academic bureaucracy, the importance of maintaining and following an institution's protocol, and the handling of university property such as personal computers.

A scholar I have known for many years was recently appointed dean at her institution, and she called me with a faint note of panic in her voice.

She wanted advice, fast: "I need all the help I can find to get me up to speed on how to be an effective administrator. I've never had any training in this area."

She asked me what lessons I had learned as an administrator that I hadn't known as a faculty member. Here is an expanded version of what I told her:

We don't always speak as one. Many faculty members see campus administrators as an allied and coherent group whose members unite, more often than not, to work in opposition to faculty interests.

The reality is that any institution is composed of a number of self-contained (though interrelated) areas, and each leader will be preoccupied with making the most persuasive case on behalf of his or her area. Far from a grand us-versus-them conspiracy, what you will inevitably find in any institution will be administrators advocating tenaciously for their particular programs--often in direct competition with other programs.

Bureaucrats or academic leaders? For purposes of contrast, think of administrators as falling into one of those two types. Bureaucrats just want to be in charge. They have no real vision or desire to advance a department; they simply want to be "the boss" and have people report to them. Consequently, they have little interest in change and are quite comfortable with the status quo. True academic leaders, however, are dedicated to productive change. They want their programs to be among the best of their kind. They are not content with simply being in charge. All of us in administration make a choice, consciously or not, as to where on this spectrum we will fall.

Bureaucracy shouldn't trump innovation. In academe, people often respond to any proposed change in policy or procedure by saying "university rules prohibit that" or "state law does not allow that" or "federal regulations specify that we can't do that."

Too often, no such rule or regulation exists; it is a figment of lore, faulty memory, or wishful thinking. At other times, such a rule may exist but is interpreted so narrowly as to subvert its original intent. While administrators are required to comply with rules and regulations, it is also part of the job to seek out new ideas. If we are to lead our institutions, we need to fight the urge to respond to change with knee-jerk resistance.

However, get used to saying no. A paradox of academic administration is that while a key role of department chairs, deans, and presidents is to support and encourage faculty and staff members, our daily experience often involves denying their requests. Qualified applicants for positions, awards, and grants have to be informed that they were unsuccessful. Worthy programs and proposals have to be rejected for one reason or another. And perfectly reasonable requests have to be denied. Put simply, leadership often means being able to say "no" while continuing to encourage the very person whose request you are rejecting.

Don't rush to judgment. It's a daily reality for most academic administrators to hear from someone with a compelling account of a dispute who wants us to take action based on that individual's version of events. It is all too easy to leap to the conclusion that the most recent narrative you've heard is "the truth." We all are susceptible to a rush to judgment. The wise administrator waits to hear the competing story, which, inevitably, will be equally compelling. The most effective administrators monitor themselves constantly to avoid potentially costly blunders in rushing to judgment before hearing all sides.

Follow protocol. Proper protocol--the time-honored, orderly, and collegial way of dealing with issues in academe--seems to be deteriorating. Leaping over several layers of authority to take your concerns directly to the president because you believe that will produce the results you want is a breach of protocol. And it's usually counterproductive, since the appeal typically gets kicked back to the appropriate level anyway.

We should return to academe's system of professional etiquette. This is an appeal to act responsibly. Avoid falling prey to the immediacy of e-mail, to instant gratification, to the temptation to damage someone's reputation, or to any of the other motives that cause us to violate academic propriety. As in society in general, good etiquette promotes good will; its absence fosters resentment and discontent.

Conduct business as openly as you can. Academic administrators have a responsibility to act in as transparent a manner as possible. Don't just avoid secrecy; promote a climate of openness. Provide clear explanations of how and why decisions are made, and make budgets and other key documents and procedures available whenever possible.

Understand the philosophy of "chargebacks." A common complaint at most institutions is that offices are often charged fees for work or services they receive from other campus offices. That practice, often called "chargebacks," is much misunderstood because it seems counterintuitive: If you are employed by the university, why should you be charged a fee by another part of the institution? While practices vary, most universities employ a number of internal "cost-recovery" measures, especially at public institutions strapped for money. The rationale is that each unit should bear its own weight. A fee-based system allows each unit to become self-sustaining, to pay its own way rather than to become a drain on the institution as a whole.

Recognize people's accomplishments. Academe now is characterized by an economy of scarcity, and in such an environment, the true cultural capital is proper recognition of good work. Yet too many institutions do a poor job of that. Creating a culture of recognition goes a long way toward improving attitudes and working conditions in any college or university.

Your university computer is not really yours. Many college personnel see campus computers and e-mail accounts as their own private property--a type of employment benefit provided with no constraints on use. In fact, universities "assign" computer equipment and accounts as tools to help us perform our jobs, in the same way that institutions assign offices, laboratory space, or photocopy machines. Computer equipment, far from being personal property, is owned and maintained by the university, with restrictions on how it may be used. That means that use of university computers or e-mail accounts for anything other than university business is a breach of ethics and typically a violation of university policy.

Make friends with fund raisers. University fund raisers are sometimes dismissed or even disparaged by many faculty members as academe's equivalent of used-car salesman. Fund raising, however, has become an essential tool for fostering the very academic endeavors that we all cherish. Especially given today's economy, it is essential that institutions discover ways to reduce their reliance on state assistance and to attract private dollars. A fund raiser should become your new best friend and ally, not someone to avoid.

"Searching" and "recruiting" are not always the same thing. Building a first-rate academic unit is like developing a successful athletics program. The search process is our opportunity to assemble the ideal team. That means recognizing that passive searching for faculty members isn't enough; to be truly successful, we must actively recruit academics.

Those are some of the key lessons that I mentioned to my colleague who is becoming a dean, but they are central to understanding administrative values and work in general. I only wish that I had understood those aspects of academic administration early in my career as a young faculty member.

As faculty members, we are preoccupied with our own disciplinary concerns and know little about how our institutions actually work. If we were to make the effort to pay attention to other areas of the university, however, we could potentially make our own jobs and working conditions much more tolerable--and even more rewarding. And we would be better prepared for administrative roles.

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By GARY A. OLSON

Gary A. Olson recently stepped down from the position of provost at Idaho State University. He is on leave for the fall semester. He is an editor, along with John Presley, of "The Future of Higher Education: Perspectives from America's Academic Leaders," newly released in paperback (Paradigm).

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