Name This Job: A Faculty Member Becomes a Novice Administrator

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Human shield, mediator, cop, the implementation box, good help. These are ways others have described me as a new administrator. To my provost's alarm, I recently dubbed myself "gofer diplomat." He told me to call myself something better than that. "Diplomat in residence *with portfolio*," he suggested earnestly. They are all true descriptions of what I do and are also all wrong. Even more than in teaching, my first love, I find that administration is all about the development of talent in people in the context of resolving complex problems or maintaining the complicated systems we already have. Thus, the roles one plays as an administrator vary dramatically from day to day, or even within a single day.

My job as special assistant to the provost provides an unusually broad view of the university compared to those vistas I might have enjoyed as a department chair or an assistant dean. Even so, the job has its complications. My position has no formal authority, so I've learned the concrete reality of the often abstract concepts of the sources of informal power and of the difference between power and authority about which I teach. I have informational power and a measure of personal authority (meaning I draw upon my credibility as an academic), but know that my access to the provost lends me power and that his direct and public assignment of me to various missions provides a large dollop of authority. Relative to him, I just do my job as best I possibly can—he's the one who, west Texan that he is, called me "good help."

So what do I do as a wannabe administrator? Faculty members have a hard time imagining what is over the divide, so it's a good question. We had a Progress Report on General Education due to our regional accreditor. My provost declared me the director of Gen Ed and chair of the Gen Ed Council. All is now well with our accreditors. In the process of writing the report, I learned that our distribution requirement had serious operational difficulties. My goodness, yes, it had problems. Advisors had very clear and negative views on our system and Degree Audit (I didn't know the office existed as a faculty member) was none too keen on it either; and the students, well, they hated it because it was so confusing. The Council and I danced around a solution for nine months before, at our very last meeting, solving the operational problem. Next year we tackle the intellectual and pedagogical aspects of what are certainly higgledy-piggledy collections of courses. While all that was going on, I figured out how to cut a third of my budget in honor of state budget cuts, though I don't know how the cut will affect the classroom next year.

My second main task is in assessment and regional accreditation. The person who had been chairing the University Assessment Council wanted out of the job, so I ended up with it. I've done it less well than Gen Ed, but we did sustain a project over the year evaluating our entire curriculum. At the start of the year, council members wanted no part of assessment projects; now they want to try some next year. A few are even willing to contemplate some forms of more centralized assessment, though all are wary of too much centralization. Engineers are insanely interested in learning outcomes; those here have provided a fine education to all of us in assessment. Some of their most interesting assessment concerns have been about writing and speaking. Whenever anyone has a regional accreditation issue, whether in best practices for a process or a new site for distance learning, I interact with our accreditation organization. In addition, the Assessment Council and I help with other types of accreditors. We are preparing for a visitation from the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) next year.

My provost said I would get "other broadening projects." He delivered on his promise. He asked about our success with national fellowships. We weren't doing as well as we should. So, I found out how other schools managed their young scholars. Now I talk to high-flying first years just to let them know that there are national fellowships available and to connect them to relevant faculty in their majors. I just love that job. They have such diverse interests. One wants to design fishing equipment; I will never look at a fishing reel again without thinking of him. Another wants to do computer modeling of high-energy physics problems at CERN. Another wants to study language and community in the U.S. Yet another wants to model insect-bird-landscape interactions. Each time I finish up with a student, I send a little prayer off to the dean of students, who is probably coping with a student on probation or the latest incident of fraternity-sponsored underage drinking. My provost also goes to a meeting of state provosts. They decided to compare their organizations. Yeah, you guessed it. Now I know how all the provost offices in the Michigan public universities are similar or different. It's surprising how often that project has proven useful. He runs new degree proposals by me for input. Odds and ends like that are what I do. Perhaps "odd jobber" is the best title for me.

This summer I worked full time for him instead of half time. He said he intended to keep me fully or perhaps overfully occupied. I'm all for this, because I'm a danger to myself and to others if I have time on my hands. Fortunately for me, he is both getting things off his desk and taking care to continue my administrator education (perhaps someday I can call myself a teacher of new administrators). There was a prosaic problem with our undergraduate catalog—if we added any more pages we would no longer qualify for the bulk mailing rate, an instant $24,000 problem. Off I went with an administrative associate (she is the one who called me a human shield) to talk to the deans. It was interesting to see both the relatively quick consensus on what to do about the weight problem and the range of process issues that might be improved.

Best of all, he designated me the university liaison to a group of state auditors doing an extended, but routine, performance audit. It was this job that prompted my "gofer diplomat" self-characterization. I learn daily about administrative processes, data, and offices that I had no clue about even a few weeks ago. For the first time, I've had call to talk to our athletic director and to discover that our software security

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503003196 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contracts have an impact on what computer the auditors can use when they access our networks. I have to say that I really enjoy the mental exercise of trying to figure out what the auditors will want next and what streams they will decide to skip over or to wade into. I am becoming a geek, I guess.

I don't think of myself as a cop or an implementation box in a process diagram, but that characterization came out of strategic planning. Somehow, everyone else on the committee decided I could run around talking to units about their progress on their plans. This was certainly a case of "you do this instead of us." Who am I to argue with vice presidents, deans, or the president of the University Senate? I guess I am the enforcer on Gen Ed requirements, though I try mightily to help the students who show up in my office cope with whatever difficulties, self-inflicted or otherwise, they may have. Once in a great while I have to be stern. It's rather like chairing a grad student's committee: you calm the student one day and bark the next. I'm a softy at heart, however, both as a teacher and an administrator.

Learner is a title any administrator deserves. Administration teaches patience. It teaches respect for processes, as well as for the necessity of discretion and common sense. It provides considerable intellectual challenge, in the sense of drawing on one's multiple intelligences. One learns where the boundaries of status and turf are, which is just plain fascinating. For example, deans can simultaneously be polite and give you a real dusting when that nearly invisible line is crossed. They also give generous and good advice. Administration enriches one's faculty world by enlarging it to include caring and knowledgeable staff, students who are not sitting in your class, and those mysterious "external constituencies" one hears exist.

Administration teaches humility in decision making. Even more than in classroom teaching, the administrator confronts ethical questions very directly and very frequently. An attempt to avoid one ethical trap may cause you to slide into another. Balancing the interests of the institution with those of the individual lies at the heart of these ethical dilemmas. I am often inclined to wait rather than err. Yet, failure to decide generates its own set of ethical questions. Until I started this new work, I don't think I rightly understood that timeliness is not just a tactical issue, but also an ethical one. At least once I've set off on the correct decision process before suddenly taking a right turn into stupidity. Errors of this nature prompt instant email flaming. And do you know what? When I follow the decision processes I teach, things usually turn out pretty well. So, I believe and understand what I teach more than ever.

All in all, I must say that I like the administrative work I do, no matter what names characterize it. I mentioned to the president of the Undergraduate Student Government that I liked what I did, but that my faculty colleagues thought I had a screw loose. He, wise for his years, commented, "Oh, I don't think it means you have a screw loose, unless you love your work every minute." I'm safe by that standard. Nevertheless, enjoyment, too, is essential to good administration. If you don't enjoy it, you ought to get out right fast. Otherwise all the titles in the world won't help.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096503003196 Published online by Cambridge University Press