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Advice

Crossing Over to the Dark Side

By George Dowdall and Jean Dowdall

Faced with a job opportunity in academic administration, faculty members sometimes struggle with the decision of whether to cross over and take on the assignment.

Some envision administration as an entirely new career path, and expect to move from being a department head to being a dean or an associate dean, an associate academic vice president, a provost, and, ultimately, a president. Others see a particular administrative assignment as intriguing, but don't anticipate staying away from a faculty role for very long.

But all of those people have some reservations, concerns, and questions. And that's where we hope this column can help.

One of us (George) is a professor of sociology who has held several posts in academic administration and the other (Jean) is a search consultant who has worked on many searches for deans and academic vice presidents in which faculty members were candidates. We recently presented a workshop on the topic of moving into administration for department heads at a American Sociological Association meeting. We talked with several chairs about their options and aspirations; this essay draws on their experiences.

The lives of full-time faculty members and full-time administrators are different in significant ways. Here are some of the most important differences:

A different academic calendar: As a faculty member, you usually come and go with a lot of flexibility. There is an expectation that you will meet your classes at the appointed times, keep office hours, and attend important meetings. But beyond that, you have considerable choice about your work schedule and few people may notice when you arrive and leave. That is a key attraction of a faculty position.

Administrators, on the other hand, are usually expected to be in the office during normal business hours, and their colleagues in that office see them come and go. Questions may be raised about those who regularly arrive late or leave early. Vacations

that faculty members normally take (winter break, spring break, summer break) are not necessarily seen as time off for administrators, who are more likely to have a limited number of weeks off each year. Vacation time may be monitored, either formally or informally.

Going to the gym for a couple of hours at midday, or leaving early to be with young children after school, may be either unmanageable logistically, or unacceptable socially, for an administrator.

Some people welcome the more structured schedule of administrative work, while others miss the freedom of the faculty life.

A new organizational role: As a faculty member, you have colleagues. Once tenured, most professors have little sense of their being subordinate to any other faculty member. We once asked a faculty member who his supervisor was, and he was dumbfounded by the question. "I don't have a supervisor!" he said.

Administrators are always clear who their supervisor is, and typically report to that person either formally or informally on a regular basis. Having clear supervision can be very valuable — you can get good feedback about your work, seek advice and support, and offer suggestions about new projects. Whether you will enjoy that level of supervision or chafe under it depends, again, on the personality.

Different relationships: Professors have to find ways to work with colleagues and students in their departments. But beyond that, faculty members have few clear obligations to their fellow workers. If you don't like someone in your own department, you can usually find ways to avoid working too closely with that person, and if you don't like someone in another department, you generally don't have to work with him or her at all.

As an administrator, you will often have no choice but to work with people you don't like. Your boss, other administrators in your office, support staff members, people working on the same

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projects as you in different offices — all of those people will be part of your network of relationships, like it or not.

Such work-mandated relationships can be extremely rewarding and often become friendships. But there is no guarantee. You can be thrown together with people who drive you crazy.

You have to make decisions: As faculty members, you are free to think critically and postpone decision-making, calling for further research on difficult questions before coming to closure. Some administrators postpone decision-making, too, but they are usually criticized for that.

And some decisions just can't be postponed. Does the new faculty line go to philosophy or physics? Should the limited travel money be used to support three people very generously or five people rather meagerly? Which students will be accepted into the selective program to which they are seeking admission? Does that controversial faculty member deserve tenure?

If you have clear guidelines for your decisions, or a sense of direction or vision for the area you are administering, the answers to those questions may flow easily. But often the burden will fall on you to make a judgment call; some people are more comfortable with that burden than others.

Conflict is unavoidable: If you don't like conflict and you are a faculty member, you can usually find a way to stay away from it. But administrators are often expected to get deeply involved in conflict, not by fomenting it but by helping to resolve it.

Your friends will view you differently: If you move from the faculty to an administrative role, you may feel like the same person, but your old friends and colleagues may not view you that way.

As Jean recalls, soon after taking on an administrative role, I attended a meeting of women's studies faculty members: People who used to be my colleagues asked me to step outside while they decided whether administrators were welcome at the meeting. It was a shocking moment, but one that many people who make this career change experience in one form or another.

The barriers between faculty and administrators can be heightened when there is collective bargaining. Those who become administrators may give up union membership, faculty rank, and tenure. All of those changes intensify the difficulty of moving from one role to the other.

Compensation changes: Professors typically are paid a salary based on the nine months of the academic year. Administrators are typically paid a 12-month salary. That alone increases administrative compensation, but often administrators earn a higher rate of pay as well.

The money can certainly be an attraction of administrative work, but it can also be just one more barrier between you and other faculty members.

The place of leadership changes: Faculty members work as equals. Even though they may hold different ranks, or have different stature, they are all the same in that they are all faculty members.

Administrators are often asked to step into a leadership role — to head a meeting or a committee, to articulate the direction that a project or a program should go, or to decide that, following a complex or divisive discussion, one approach will be taken and another put aside. It may be difficult for a faculty member, at least initially, to take on a leadership role in that way, but over a period of time it can become second nature.

If you think you might like to take on administrative responsibilities, consider looking for a "gateway" role that allows you to see how you like that kind of assignment. You lead the self-study for your institution's accreditation. Or you might become the head of an important standing committee or take on an ad hoc role such as leading a special panel to study retention.

Such projects can give you both experience and visibility. If you do a good job, and you want to move into administration, your efforts may be noticed and lead to additional opportunities.

Many people have made the transition from a faculty role to an administrative one. If you are considering a promotion, take a look at all of the themes that we have raised here. If you don't feel the pull to the administrative side of each dimension, now may be the time to back off.

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