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Don't Cry for Me, Academia!

For some of us, administrative work is not just an obligation or a noble sacrifice — it's a calling



Isabel Espanol for The Chronicle

By Kevin J.H. Dettmar | JUNE 27, 2016

The usual quips about academic administration are surely pretty familiar to this audience. Chairing a department is "like herding cats." To move from the faculty ranks into administration is to go, Vader-like, "to the dark side." Upon one's appointment, colleagues wonder whether to offer "congratulations or condolences."

Such sentiments pervade the higher-ed ecosystem — at research universities and liberal-arts colleges and, I presume, at two-year colleges as well.

To be sure, no one completes a Ph.D. (as opposed to an Ed.D.) in order to enter campus administration. But for some of us, at a certain point in our careers, administrative work is no longer something to dread or to apologize for. For some of us, serving as chair of a department or dean of a college comes unbidden as a second, midcareer calling. Too often, perhaps, it calls us away from the work we were destined to do, and those tend to be the stories we hear. But sometimes, taking on administrative duties is precisely the culmination and fulfillment of that scholarly work, allowing us, for the first time, to recognize our past as prologue.

In the summer of 2015, I finished (or thought I had finished) a successful seven-year term as chair of my department. I had a yearlong sabbatical waiting for me; and while no one was keen to fill the vacancy, one faculty colleague did volunteer to chair for a year (before going on leave himself), and another to accept a three-year term that would begin this summer. During my long-anticipated sabbatical year, I've been doing a lot of writing, catching up on some of what I'd had to set aside as chair — mine is an institution that does not award release time for chairing.

Recently, though, I was talking in my office with a junior colleague I'd helped to hire a few years ago. She surprised me by asking — apropos of nothing, or so it seemed to me — "Would you ever consider chairing again?" My answer, immediate and unambiguous, surprised me even more than her question: "In a heartbeat. I'd do it tomorrow."

For — much as I was enjoying my protected time to read, write, and think — on some level I was also beginning to realize that I missed my interactions with colleagues, and my work on their behalf. I suspect that my friend sensed it, too: After all, who works in his department office while on sabbatical, never mind inviting colleagues in to chat?

One thing led to another, and when I tentatively asked the chair-in-waiting whether she was excited about taking over, she allowed that, in fact, like *Bartelby*, she "would prefer not to." And so I will, again, starting July 1. Meet the new boss: same as the old boss. (And, of course, really no "boss" at all.)

We don't talk enough about this: That besides representing an obligation, or a noble sacrifice, academic administration can be a calling. That the work, rather than draining and distracting, can be incredibly rewarding. That while it requires training and accomplishment as a scholar to qualify one for such an appointment, success in it relies on a set of gifts that, for the most part, have nothing to do with those that sent us off to graduate school in the first place.

When the email went out to faculty announcing that I'd be back to chair in the fall, my closest friend in the department sent me a worried note. Was I being coerced, he wanted to know? Was I "taking one for the team"? Somewhat sheepishly, I admitted that, in fact, I was quite happy about this turn of events. And he wrote back: "You have the leadership

gene. Strange and marvelous to me." (He's a MacArthur Fellow; I fired back, "Well you're a genius — equally strange and marvelous to me." I guess I put him in his place. Many parts, one body, the Apostle Paul would say.)

David Damrosch touches on the perverse supply pipeline for academic leadership in his 1995 book, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University*. "For the better part of a century," he points out, "we have been selecting for certain kinds of alienation and aggression on campus. We need to reconsider the sorts of academic personality we encourage — and even create — through our extended rituals of training and acculturation. The progressive isolation we enforce on graduate students favors personalities who have relatively little need for extended intellectual exchange."

That's putting it mildly. If no one seeks a Ph.D. in order to become a department chair or dean, so, too, everything about the graduate-school experience serves to quash any vestigial impulse toward social interaction. In graduate school, people who need people are the unluckiest people in the world.

Administration is a category of academic work that faculty-reward systems refuse to recognize adequately. We're taught from early on how to value our accomplishments as scholars, and we choose mentors whose research has distinguished them in their fields. At most prestigious colleges and universities, good teaching alone won't suffice to establish a distinguished career, but every institution worth its salt at least professes to care about teaching, and very publicly rewards it. It's easy enough, then, to feel good about being a good teacher, and it's certainly in that guise that an often hostile public likes us best.

But academic administration is abject: It requires gifts that one apologizes for possessing. I'm still vaguely embarrassed every time I send someone a spreadsheet as an email attachment.

I probably feel that way more acutely than most owing to the particulars of my situation. I'm something of a stowaway. Back in 2007 I was resigned to, if not excited about, spending the remainder of my career at the institution where I held tenure as a full professor, and where I had chaired my department for a three-year term. I'm proud of

what I've accomplished as a scholar, but I'm not delusional: I know that my credentials wouldn't make me an obvious choice for the one or two attractive senior jobs that come open in my field in a given year.

So I was checking job listings not on my own behalf, but for two dissertation students, when I stumbled upon the ad for the position I now hold. The department sought a senior scholar in any one of three literary fields (one of them was my field), with experience as a department chair. I'm not sure I would have had enough evidence in either Column A or Column B alone to seal the deal — but I did have enough in the two categories combined, it turned out.

Thus in the late summer of my career I got to make a move to an institution the likes of which I'd previously only daydreamed about. Almost literally: For this is the very college that I'd dreamt of attending when I was 17, only to be held back by my family's financial situation. I didn't get my position here because my name was on everyone's lips and my books in everyone's offices. No, I snuck in through the servant's entrance: as a department chair.

Being good at academic administration paradoxically makes one feel bad about oneself. Surely this is wrong. What I'm advocating here is not a prescription for every Ph.D. It's only a path for some of us. But for those few — having taught well, published our articles and books, and created a scholarly identity — the next challenge and source of career fulfillment lies in taking on the job of hiring and mentoring younger scholars, and devoting our experience to the task of clearing obstacles for them so that they might enjoy the same rewards and fulfillment as scholars and teachers that we have.

Consider: In the Harry Potter novels, Professor Pomona Sprout works primarily behind the scenes. We only learn in the epilogue to the final volume that her pupil, Neville Longbottom, has become professor of herbology at Hogwarts owing to Sprout's quiet support. In my career here at Pomona (College), I'm trying to take her as a role model.

There's a lot more to good chairing than just faculty mentoring, of course, even if that's the piece I most relish. It falls to chairs to provide leadership and vision for a department, facilitating the discussion around questions like: What kind of department do we want to

be? How might our curriculum change to keep pace with our evolving field and changing student population? What is our department's role in the larger college or university community? How might we provide intellectual leadership for the campus?

That's who I am now — a senior professor who has done scholarly work that I'm proud of (and will do more), and who deeply values his relationships with students, but whose most rewarding challenge these days involves facilitating the work of my colleagues.

Satisfaction in the chair's role requires measuring success in terms of people and relationships, not publications. Academe secretly runs on the quiet work of such people, the gift of service provided by those who recognize that they have been given much, and find they have much to give back. It's fueled by a kind of entrepreneurial generosity — a professional liberality actively in search of colleagues in whom to invest. As a friend and colleague commented on a draft of this essay, "Our system is premised on the notion of leadership by the faculty — and yet we devalue that leadership ... and then complain about lousy leadership after dissuading the majority of our potential leadership talent." As a community, we would be well served to find ways to honor administrative work and find it a source of pride rather than shame.

That's why I'm returning from sabbatical this fall to chair my department for a few more years. I couldn't be happier about it: We have a lot of work to do, and I'm keen to get started. And I count myself fortunate to be entrusted with such important work. For me, at least, congratulations, not condolences, are in order.

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