

## Some Lessons from Academic Administration

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One of the attractions of academia is that we get to do mainly what we want in research and teaching, without much interference from on others. Leading colleagues with that mindset can be challenging. Fortunately, in engineering there is a countervailing force: the recognition that engineering is a team sport, with the best results when people with diverse skills come together. This note provides some lessons from my experience in multiple academic leadership roles up to the level of associate dean, i.e., roles in which the primary job still includes research and teaching, but for which more than the usual measure of service is demanded.

*Vision.* In any given role, you'll mainly be dealing with what the world throws at you. But you can accomplish some small number of priorities that can be of long-term benefit, if you are persistent. The very fact that change is difficult in academia means that any you accomplish will tend to endure. What aspects of the basic teaching and research missions do you want to enhance? How will you get buy-in? It's definitely worth getting advice from predecessors. They know the history.

*Respect.* Your respect for your colleagues, staff members, and students will be returned. There are so many things you can learn from them, and they can learn from you. In an atmosphere of mutual respect and commitment to the research and teaching mission, so much can be accomplished. Building and maintaining such an environment over time is far more important than "winning" any particular policy battle: it provides the means by which you can collectively come to the right solution.

*In praise of committees.* You can begin with the assumption that your colleagues are just as smart as you and likely have very good reasons for their opinions. If they think a different solution to some administrative problem will work better, ask them to explain why. A surprising number of times they will have an angle you never considered. An even larger number of times they won't actually care about the solution so long as it is reasonable: they are just as busy as you are, and if a group of colleagues have come up with something workable they're willing to go along with it. But you can reduce the odds of strong opposition at a faculty meeting by forming a committee and following this simple procedure: 1) the committee chair lays out the issues and proposes a solution or alternative solutions in a white paper; 2) the committee meets to discuss the white paper and move towards some consensus solution; 3) the policy is presented to the faculty at large. Usually that's the end of it apart from technical modifications, if the committee has had on the order of 5 members representing a diversity of views in the Department. In probability, the most likely objections will have been already dealt with in the consensus-building process of the committee. If the committee can't come to a consensus, the time is not ripe for change—move on to some other priority for which consensus is more feasible. Never propose a detailed new policy at a general faculty meeting without having

first solicited a variety of views—this is an invitation for everyone to hold forth at length on their preferred alternatives. This hardens positions and slows down change. By contrast, a committee that has spent the time coming up with something that reflects a variety of views commands respect, and is most likely to have produced something considerably better than either your idea or the original white paper proposal. Publicly thank the committee for their work. Encourage them to note it in their university service record.

*Persuasion, not power.* The autonomy and native intelligence of the faculty enables any small faction who object to some proposal to effectively deep-six it through foot-dragging, creative evasions, etc. If you have to invoke the authority of your official position to enact some significant change, you've lost. Consensus that something is at least not objectionable is required, or the reform will not stick. This requires discussion of alternatives, and sometimes shelving a reform and revisiting it multiple times until a consensus emerges. In the worst case, we can continue to tolerate the status quo. For routine administrative matters for which some response is needed, polite requests with a bit of guilt thrown in usually work well (I'm sorry, I know you're super-busy, but I really need your help with this...). E-mail entreaties do not get universal response, but in-person begging almost always succeeds—because both they and you know that most academic leadership is a volunteer activity, they will have pity when you show up at their office. Yes, service is part of the job description, and yes, some positions come with stipends. But these stipends pay a fraction of what could be earned in consulting gigs with similar time commitments. So service really is a matter of duty owed to peers. Academic leadership is not like a company career track where it's on and up, and then possibly off to a different company. You will be with your colleagues for many years, and typically go back to the ranks after the duty is done. The long-term relationships in an academic department demand a different leadership style—one based on willingly taking on responsibility, and for those presently not in authority, willingly deferring to their equals in the interests of the group. Authority flows from the fact of service in the interests of the research and teaching mission: very little is inherent in the formal description of the office.

*Support the staff who meet job expectations.* These are the people who know the administrative details of the university and keep you out of jail or administrative hell from unwittingly neglecting some regulation. Listen to them. The power structure of universities is such that faculty often get away with bullying staff; when in leadership, you need to protect the staff from such behavior. The first step is finding out if it is happening, but one can also be proactive in discussing at a faculty meeting your expectations and the value proposition for polite deportment. If in a leadership role like department chair or dean, you need to have regular meetings with the managers or you won't know what's going on. They can teach you many useful things including how other administrative units of the university actually work. Support them in obtaining training that will enable promotions, even when you lose someone awesome in the process. Helping them progress is part of the mission of an educational institution. Most staff will respond well when given autonomy. Micro-managing is competent staff members is counterproductive. When they are uncertain about some course of action, they will come

to you for a decision that has your authority. On the other hand, if staff (or faculty) aren't performing, you need to work through all the HR steps required to have them leave your organization. The solution for a person who is persistently unhappy in their job is to steer them to a job in a different unit or institution. They will never become happy in their present job, no matter what accommodations are made.

*Rare events in a department aren't so rare in a university.* While it might not be apparent from daily experience, there is a reason for many of the policies and positions in the central administration. The procedures exist because of things that happen often enough in the university as a whole to demand them. Reach out to the relevant officials for help when you encounter something you haven't seen before, whether it's a difficult personnel problem or a student in a mental health crisis. Chances are, they know exactly what to do while you'd be floundering.

*Rules are your friend, but not your master.* Why do we have so many rules about academic programs and so many procedures? It's because they provide the default decision, thus saving a lot of time and emotional energy. Being transparent and upfront about the basis of promotions, grades, budgets, etc. avoids a great deal of conflict. But part of the job of administration is to consider whether rules need to be changed, or whether exceptions are warranted. If we could do everything using rules alone with the full diversity of students, staff and faculty, there would be little need for administrators.

*Undergraduates are undervalued.* They have enthusiasm, run design clubs, tutor fellow students—and will be engineers when they graduate. Along the way they have lots of ideas that could help improve the undergraduate program. Solicit their input. With scaffolding, they can be effective teachers of other students in hands-on activities, especially when paired with peers. And all of this is useful professional development. It is worth spending time and money to make more of them partners in the academic enterprise.

*Scholarship is fun.* There is nothing more dreadful to most professors than doing administration all the time. Keep teaching, keep saying yes to being a member of a thesis committee, keep having hallway conversations with colleagues, keep attending seminars by visiting scholars. Many administrative problems are like demons: they can be temporarily banished back to the Pit, but they or their related brethren may come back in some new form to torment you or a successor. With teaching however most students show tangible forward progress. It feels good to learn new things, and open worlds of wonder for others. That's why you're in academia. That's still your mission, even in administration.