

Reflections on Assuming Administrative Responsibilities as an Untenured Assistant Professor

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In this short essay, I would like to share some of my experiences as an untenured assistant professor who took on an administrative position. I never imagined that I would be involved in administration, particularly as a junior faculty member, so I was not especially well prepared. However, after juggling the responsibilities of research, teaching, service, and administration for the past year and a half, I can offer some guidance to other assistant professors who may be considering an administrative post. My experiences are informed by working within a large, public research university, yet they should resonate with my colleagues at smaller universities and colleges, both public and private. Facing shrinking budgets, many schools find it more cost effective to augment the salaries of faculty rather than hire additional full-time personnel to serve in administrative positions. At many four-year liberal arts colleges and junior colleges, new faculty may even be required to engage in administrative tasks as a matter of course without reduced teaching or additional compensation. According to the transcripts of a recent round-table discussion, this phenomenon also occurs at community colleges. As Richard J. Daley College political science professor Constance Mixon warns potential job applicants, “Keep in mind and talk to others about . . . their committee work and administrative responsibilities and especially those requirements as they relate to the tenure process.”¹

As Mixon’s remarks indicate, one of the things that they don’t tell you about

in graduate school is administrative work. They also generally fail to explain how much time service on department and university committees can consume. However, many assistant professors end up chairing committees, directing undergraduate advising, serving as graduate directors, directing research centers, and even filling the role of department chairs on occasion, among other kinds of administrative work. While these activities may add to your vita, as well as increase your income and professional status, you should think twice about becoming an administrator as an untenured assistant professor. No matter if your primary obligation is research or teaching, administrative work has the potential to divert your effort away from excelling at either. This essay proceeds with an overview of my own experiences with administration, followed by a discussion of the risks and rewards of assuming administrative responsibilities, and concludes with the lessons I draw from that experience which may be useful to others considering administrative work.

A Novice Enters the World of Administration

At the end of my second year as an assistant professor, I received an announcement detailing a faculty coordinator position with a newly created residential college program. Residential college programs have been springing up all over the country in recent years. The goal of these programs is usually to focus community building efforts in a residence hall around an academic program, or what is often known as a living and learning community. The particular program that interested me was our university’s recently created version of a freshman year experience program, which is designed to “shrink” the size of the university by bringing faculty, programs, and services to students in the place they live, thereby easing their

transition from high school to college. The announcement requested a faculty member willing to work approximately 20 hours per week to help build the academic community for this particular residential college. In exchange, the faculty member would be given course release and additional compensation during the summer semester and regular academic year.

The announcement piqued my interest for several reasons. First, as an undergraduate I had lived on a “theme” floor dedicated to students who had won a scholarship from my state’s board of regents. Fond memories from my own interaction with faculty as a student in this living and learning environment prompted me to consider how I might give something back in return. Second, as an undergraduate and graduate student I had worked as a student staff member in the residence halls. I was therefore familiar with the culture of residential life departments, and I had enjoyed working within one. Third, rather than continue to complain about the poor quality of my undergraduates as a professor, I saw this as an opportunity to do something to improve their academic performance. Fourth, as a new assistant professor struggling to make ends meet at a public university where faculty salaries were well below the national average, I saw the additional compensation as a welcome bonus. Finally, the course release seemed to offer additional time to devote to my research. Overall, the position seemed to be an excellent fit. So, guided by a mixture of altruism and self-interest, I decided to move forward on the position.

However, as an untenured assistant professor, I felt the need to seek advice from the more senior members of my department. Their most common concern was that participation in this program would be detrimental to my research agenda. As an anxious, untenured assistant professor, I contacted the director of the residential college program for

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more information. I expressed my concerns, and he assured me that the position would take no more than 20 hours per week. Further, he suggested that the summer stipend would allow time to focus on my research without recourse to teaching for additional compensation, as many junior members of my own department did on a regular basis. This conversation put my mind at ease, and after clearing my decision with the department chair, I formally applied for the position. After an interview with a formidable steering committee, comprised of a vice-provost, a vice-chancellor, and several deans and directors, I was hired.

My first semester in this position was great. The director was conducting much of the business that I would eventually take over as he taught me the duties and responsibilities of the position as he knew them at the time. I found that I could easily accommodate the numerous meetings, office hours, and activities associated with the residential college with little effect on my research and teaching. It seemed that I had made a good decision. However, as I moved into the spring semester and began to take over the planning and implementation of all areas of the program, I saw trouble on the horizon. The first time I scheduled courses for our program, I lost three full weeks to the endeavor, as I was attempting to coordinate courses, sections, days, and times among seven departments and nearly 30 faculty members. Soon thereafter, we began to develop a core seminar designed to teach critical thinking skills to all 400 of our students. I found developing the academic curriculum for this program to be satisfying in many ways, but the amount of time I was committing to it had started to become excessive. By the end of the semester, I was working nearly full-time recruiting and selecting two dozen peer mentors, starting a parents' organization, and of all things, fundraising! What started out as a part-time position designed to enhance student-faculty interaction and promote community development ended up as a full-time administrative position, in which I rarely had any time to interact with students.

The summer proved just as bad. In retrospect, it seems crazy that I allowed this position to swallow up my time, but the responsibilities of developing this program crept up on me. I wanted to do a good job and develop a good reputation, as I routinely worked with faculty, administrators, and staff from all

over the university. However, in order to keep up with my responsibilities in the political science department and the residential college, I was literally working around the clock seven days a week. I lost the ability to sleep as I was either planning for the residential college or thinking about my research during that otherwise quiet stretch of time as I lay

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in bed before the sun came up. By the end of the summer, I had enough. I had put in place almost every feature of a residential college that I thought was absolutely necessary and was worn out from the stress of trying to do it all. Decision makers connected with the program were well aware of the amount of time my position was taking, so, at that point, I told the director that we needed to hire an additional person to share the workload or I would have to end my association with the program. Much to my surprise, given the stretched resources of the university, he agreed to hire another person by the spring semester. Until another person is hired, I have made it clear that I will not work more than 20 hours per week on administering the residential college, no matter what the actual demands of the program require. Although the director would like me to return for another year, I will most likely transition out of this position in the spring semester and return full-time to the political science department.

Risks and Rewards

Knowing what I know now, would I take this administrative position again? It's hard to say. I have learned substantially about university operations and procedures, the kinds of resources that are available on campus, pedagogy, academic curriculum development, managerial skills, and intellectual and emotional development among college students. This experience will undoubtedly inform the way that I teach in the future. It has certainly made me a much more organized person. I learned to write when I wasn't in the mood. I

learned not to procrastinate because I simply didn't have that luxury when I was effectively working two full-time jobs. I also know that my efforts at developing an academic community have paid off in terms of improved performance and retention among the freshmen in the residential college compared to other freshmen on campus. Finally, I have formed strong professional and personal relationships with administrators, faculty, and staff from around campus. All of these things I count as rewards of assuming the administrative position, but they didn't come without risk.

In retrospect, I am lucky to have been able to further my research agenda by continuing to present papers at conferences and submitting articles to journals during this time period. I sometimes wonder how much more I could have accomplished in my research had I devoted the time spent on administration to more scholarly activities. My teaching repertoire shrank as the course release kept me out of the classroom, which troubled me and caused distress among some of my colleagues. I'm sure that my personal life suffered as well, as work became an all-consuming activity. A greater sense of the risk posed by adding administrative work to my activities at the start of this process would have been very helpful. I am now in my fourth year at the university, and time will soon tell if my bout with balancing research, teaching, service, and administrative work was successful.

Lessons Learned

So, what have I learned from this experience that might be useful to other untenured assistant professors who are asked to take on administrative duties in their department or university?

1. Remember that as an untenured assistant professor your first priority is to get tenure. In most cases, that means research—even at small liberal arts colleges. If you do not think you can effectively juggle the administrative work with your own research and teaching, then do not proceed with an administrative position. However, in my case, the workload that seemed relatively fixed at the start became uncertain and unpredictable as I began to develop and implement the program.

2. Make sure to discuss the potential administrative position with your senior faculty members. If they are against it, then do not pursue it.

3. Before taking a position, come to an agreement with key decision makers concerning the amount of time you will devote to the position, and contingency plans to reduce your workload should the time commitment become excessive.

4. Before taking a position, come to an agreement about how this work will count toward your tenure. Will it count as service? Will it not count at all? This

6. Budget your time. Most administrative positions can effectively eat up your entire day if you allow them. An hour here and an hour there can break up your day so that you do not have adequate stretches of time to think, analyze, and write. If possible, pick certain days and times that you will devote to the administrative work, and keep other days and time sacrosanct for your research.

you become your department's ambassador. If you interact with others in a positive and professional manner, your reputation among the university community will rise, with the likely result of positive feedback to your own department.

10. At regular intervals assess whether the reasons that you took the position are still valid. In my case, my main interest was in improving under-



A View from Above. Memorial Tower dominates the LSU campus skyline. Photo courtesy of Louisiana State University.

should be clarified before you start, and be agreed upon by your department. In my case, I will include the annual reports detailing my administrative work in my tenure file. However, it is still not clear exactly how my service will be considered.

5. Although most of us want to do a good job at whatever responsibilities we take on, don't lose yourself in the goals of the program you are administering, particularly if it is outside of your department. As one of my colleagues later remarked, "They will chew you up and spit you out if you are not careful!"

7. Be wary of mission creep. Once other administrators see that you are competent and efficient, they will try to add new responsibilities to your workload. Resist.

8. Be prepared to walk away from the position if it begins to harm your research and teaching, especially if assistance is not forthcoming. Unfortunately, in many cases you are probably the only person involved who has your best interests at heart.

9. Always be professional in your interaction with other administrators and faculty. If you regularly work with other departments and administrative units, then

graduate education through the same type of program that I had benefited from as an undergraduate. However, once the type of work I was doing moved further away from interaction with students, I found it less rewarding and more burdensome. At such a point, you should consider ending your administrative stint.

Conclusion

Consider the advice I have shared in this essay as a way to think carefully through the responsibilities associated with an administrative role. The

usefulness of this advice will vary depending upon the type of position you are considering and whether it is located

in your department or the university at large. In the end, it all comes down to an intensely personal decision about

whether the risks of complicating your tenure bid are worth the perceived rewards of an administrative position.

Note

1. See Constance Mixon's remarks on p. 102 of Brudney, et al. (2002). Richard Reitano also describes his extensive administrative work as a junior faculty member on p. 109.

Reference

Brudney, Kent, et al. 2002. "Faculty Careers in Community Colleges: Placement and Professional Gratification." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 35 (March): 101–112.