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The Administrator as Magician

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HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

My college has just developed a "partner accommodations policy" that outlines how various offices will aid, "whenever possible, the hiring of qualified partners and spouses of candidates who are being recruited or offered a retention package." The college pledges to work with academic departments and other campus units to assist partners and spouses in their search for employment, and it outlines the concrete steps that college officials will take toward that end.

A faculty committee had recommended we develop the policy to aid in recruitment, and we posted an early draft on the college Web site to give everyone a chance to comment.

After we revised and adopted the policy, a faculty member scheduled an appointment with me to discuss the measure. He was unhappy because, in his words, the policy has no teeth. He felt that the college should instead establish a partner-accommodations fund of \$1-million so that we could simply hire qualified spouses or partners when the occasion arose.

"And where would we get these recurring, not temporary, funds?" I asked.

He replied that he was certain we could cover the expense. The implication? We were just being obstinate in not allocating the money to what everyone agreed was a worthy cause.

At a professional conference recently, a provost told me a similar story. A junior faculty member approached her with a formal proposal asking the university to make a long-term investment in a program in alternative-fuels research because such research was clearly the wave of the future (and also the petitioner's area of expertise).

The proposal elaborated a long list of demands, including new personnel and sophisticated scientific instrumentation. "I couldn't believe my ears," the provost told me. "He actually believed I could snap my fingers and thereby authorize the hiring of four or five new faculty members, not to mention equipping several very costly labs." The petitioner seemed somewhat piqued, she said, when she explained that if she had such resources, she would already have made the very investment he was proposing.

I heard yet another story about a distinguished chemist who arrived unexpectedly at his department head's office and announced that he had become so famous (and therefore so valuable to the institution) that he would now require a research lab double the size of his current workspace. Nonplused, the chair pointed out that the department's two newest faculty members had yet to be assigned adequate lab space. "I'm sure you can find me the space," the chemist replied. "This institution will not want to lose me."

Clearly, all three individuals feel they are being deprived of essential resources and that their institution is standing in the way of what are unmistakably (from their perspective) the right actions. A generous

interpretation of that dynamic is that they somehow perceive administrators to be magicians who, given the right incantation, can make money materialize out of thin air. A less generous reading is that they imagine administrators to be sadistic or arbitrary parental figures: "Because I said so; that's why!"

The notion that administrators routinely withhold goodies -- dollars, faculty lines, facility space -- out of some irrational parsimoniousness seems counterintuitive to me. It is in every administrator's best interest to make a genuine and sustained effort to help professors and programs succeed; to retain an outstanding faculty member, and even to appoint a qualified spouse, if possible; to create a cutting-edge research program that distinguishes the institution; and to keep faculty members happy, especially senior scientists who may, in fact, be recruited by competitors.

I would love to be able to finance every worthy project that crosses my desk -- and there are many of them. I would like to ensure that every faculty and staff member had the most up-to-date equipment, the most generous course load, and the ideal office or lab, complete with a view of the quad. And, of course, I would like to ensure that everyone is paid a wage that they themselves would agree is appropriate.

After all, who wouldn't want to play Santa Claus all year round?

The sad reality is that no administrator can support everything, regardless of how well endowed the institution. Like it or not, higher education is characterized by an economy of scarcity. We are all constantly competing for what seems to be ever-dwindling resources -- especially those of us in public institutions. Neither Santa nor magician, the typical academic administrator is simply trying to do the best he or she can with the limited resources available.

What seems to get lost in the often fraught encounters between administrators and petitioning faculty members is that, most of the time, both sides share the same goals. The disconnect is not between a good proposal and an intransigent administrator; it's between a good proposal and fiscal realities. We are all engaged in a common endeavor, under less-than-ideal circumstances.

The fact that *some* administrators act in arbitrary, less-than-altruistic ways or support only their own pet projects does not mean that administration *in general* operates that way.

Most of the administrators I know would much prefer to play Santa over Scrooge. In the final analysis, "administrator as magician" is a more fitting metaphor than "administrator as cruel parent."

As presidents, provosts, deans, or chairs, we all keep searching for those magic words that will make everything right. Until I stumble upon that perfect incantation, however, I am going to continue to make every effort to support as many of the fine projects and faculty members as I can given the constraints imposed on me. Who could possibly ask for more?

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