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How to Join the Dark Side

By Gary A. Olson

The original *Star Wars* film was not even a year old when the now-clichéd retort had already begun to circulate through academe: After accepting an appointment as department chair, your colleagues would stop you in the hallway and ask ominously, "So, you've decided to join the Dark Side?"

I was tempted to repeat that retort recently to a freshly tenured associate professor who had asked me how one "gets into" academic administration. She was fascinated by the possibility of pursuing administrative work, but the process seemed impenetrable. Her question is a good one, since most institutions provide little or no formal preparation for faculty members who wish to pursue administrative work. As a result, many think of it as remote, abstract, and out of reach, if not downright undesirable.

This young professor may well have an advantage over many of us who rose through the faculty ranks. Despite being early in her career, she has already begun to consider the possibility of administrative work and is beginning to formulate a game plan. That is not the case for most would-be administrators.

A successful university president I know could serve as a role model in that she carefully mapped out her career trajectory quite early in her career. While still an advanced associate professor, she devised a long-term plan: By the age of 45, she would be a dean at a research university; by 50, she would be a provost; by 54, a president. She was uncannily prescient: As if on cue, she took over the reins of one of the nation's largest public research universities shortly after her 54th birthday.

Such a career trajectory is more the exception than the rule. Most academics find their way into administrative work by accident. An unexpected opportunity opens up, and the time is right: A department chair resigns unexpectedly, a dean suddenly accepts a position at a competing institution, a chance discussion impresses an administrator who determines to "find a place" for you.

To be an effective administrator, you need to cultivate a knowledge base and a set of skills quite different from those acquired in the normal course of faculty life. You need facility with academic budgets, knowledge of legal issues in academic settings, deftness in handling conflicts, ability to cultivate and steward donors, familiarity with the workings of the state legislature, a thorough understanding of how other areas of the institution work and intersect with your own. More than anything, you need to be able to think outside of the discipline in which you were trained—perhaps one of the toughest hurdles for many Ph.D.'s to overcome.

But there are steps you can take to position yourself well for administrative work, and measures that chairs and deans might take to help you make the transition.

Serving on a universitywide tenure committee, for example, can help you develop a broad appreciation of the differences among disciplines: Faculty members in fields with a heavy clinical load, for example, would be expected to spend many hours a week in clinical practice and supervision, and therefore, might not produce the same volume of published research as would someone from a nonclinical field. Certain humanities disciplines might place a high priority on producing books, unlike in the natural sciences.

Developing an understanding of such differences will help you as an administrator deal fairly and effectively with diverse constituents.

Another way to gain a broad perspective of an institution is to serve on a panel charged with devising or updating the strategic plan. A well-conducted planning process will assess and account for academic goals and needs. It will also scrutinize other campus priorities, such as those outlined in the university's master plan, which details the projected evolution of the physical plant (which buildings to phase out, whether to permanently close a street on campus and transform it into a green pedestrian thoroughfare, etc.).

Of course, a time-honored step on the path to administrative work is to serve as chair of the faculty senate. That position typically affords you direct and frequent access to key administrators, as well as an insider's view of crucial issues and developments. Sometimes the head of the faculty senate serves on the president's cabinet or advisory committee. Many senate heads have gone on to become successful academic administrators, thanks in part to that experience.

Perhaps the biggest stumbling block to becoming an administrator

for some faculty members is their own reputations. In attempting to be passionate advocates for this or that cause, they vigorously argue for their position but forget to do so with temperance, diplomacy, respect, and civility. As a result, they run the risk of coming across as troublemakers or cranks rather than as reformers or ardent advocates. Once you acquire a reputation as an agitator or a loose cannon, many decision makers are reluctant to entrust you with administrative responsibilities. The key to offering constructive criticism is in the execution.

While serving on campus committees can be excellent preparation for a budding administrator, more-formal opportunities are also available. Various professional associations offer a whole range of books, seminars, Webinars, and conferences on various aspects of academic administration, although most such opportunities come with a price tag. An entrepreneurial faculty member might find a way to persuade a department head or dean to foot the bill under professional development. (And, of course, most schools of education offer courses and degrees in higher-education administration.)

Ironically, many faculty members become aware of professional-development opportunities offered by organizations like the American Council on Education only *after* they have been appointed to administrative posts. Then, desperate for good practical advice, they scramble to sign up for a workshop or two. It would be much better to attend introductory seminars or Webinars as soon as you have decided to pursue the administrative-career track, so that you are well prepared when your time comes to be appointed. More often than not, however, faculty members become department heads or unit directors having had no training for the job, and must spend the first year or two learning the ropes through trial and error.

Deans and provosts could easily reverse that trend. As dean at another university, I sponsored a mentorship program for faculty members in their first two years. We emphasized the importance of building professional relationships with colleagues and administrators from outside their departments. We wanted them to develop a broad perspective about the university and how it worked. It is precisely that broad perspective (as well as the professional relationships) that will eventually be so crucial to an aspiring administrator.

In addition, we created a one-time session for newly tenured faculty

members in which we discussed how their careers objectives and priorities might change now that they had tenure. We stressed that they now had the luxury of easing up a bit on their research and participating more fully in the governance of the institution through the faculty senate and its various committees.

Many colleges sponsor an "administrative fellows program." It often takes the form of a competitive internship award in which a faculty member can earn the opportunity to participate in a semester-long internship in the office of the dean, provost, or president.

Internships of that type are valuable because they afford direct experience in administrative planning and practices. Other institutions sponsor in-house workshops for new department heads. Participants read and discuss literature on best practices, listen to guest speakers, and review and discuss case studies. Those kinds of workshops prepare neophyte chairs not only for their new positions but also for more-advanced administrative posts in the future.

Those are only a few steps that faculty members can take to prepare for administrative appointments, and that institutions can take to support aspiring administrators. The important point is that if you're going to play Darth Vader, you might as well know in advance what you're getting into.

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