

Academic Labor

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Reflecting on Academic Labor from the Other Side

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This essay explores the differences between university administrators and faculty members in the context of a challenging environment. While recognizing that there are significant differences in roles and perspectives, the author argues that the divide between faculty and administration, while predictable, need not be as wide nor seen as inherently resulting in conflict. The author suggests that collaboration and willingness to face change can be the only productive response to the many challenges facing higher education.

The challenge to higher education is unquestioned. While the specific assaults and typically deleterious effects, as experienced within individual colleges or universities, may vary as a result of size, mission, or location, those of who labor within public and private institutions of higher education no doubt feel as we have entered a crossroads where our future viability is by no means ensured. Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* advances a critique of the conversion of the university to a quasi-(on the way to fully) corporate mentality and how this response to external pressures has not protected the university but may have helped erode our core values. There is much truth to this. Accrediting bodies do begin with propositions of total quality management or continuous quality improvement. As finances have become harder to come by, particularly as a result of the financial meltdown, concepts such as lean production (Balzer, 2010; Waterbury, 2011), the need to attend to revenue/cost ratios and to develop strategic revenue models, and forecasting revenue and enrollment have become the concern of both the financial and academic sides of the university (Layzell, 1997, Maguire & Butler, 2008). The result, I fear, is that the vocabulary and discourse of university administration, now becoming ever more professionalized and attendant to the external stressors, have the potential to create ever-widening gaps between administrators and faculty. Of course, as language and meaning go, culture follows.

Near the turn of the millennium, and several years before the first of two large economic meltdowns during the past decade, Philip Altbach (1999) observed, "American higher education finds itself in a period of significant strain. Financial cutbacks, enrollment uncertainties, pressures for accountability, and confusion about academic goals are among the challenges American colleges and universities face at the end of the twentieth century" (p. 271). More than a decade after Altbach's observation, we would agree that these pressures are only more acute. Similarly, Altbach noted how the heart of the university—the curriculum and the faculty who own and deliver it—is also under withering attack: "higher education has come under widespread criticism. Some argue that the academic system is wasteful and inefficient

and place the professoriate at the heart of problem” (ibid.). Yet, within the university the number of faculty (at least in terms of full-time and tenure track) dwindles, and most faculty have engaged in, if not exactly bought into, the models of assessment and evaluation that often link academic performance and centrality to financial salience, all in the name of value.

Even as colleges and universities struggle against the mighty external factors—financial, cultural, and ideological—that place a tremendous strain on higher education, within the institutions there are often equally fraught and complex challenges that most “civilians” little understand or recognize. As a former faculty member, or perhaps more accurately stated, as a faculty member who has spent the past dozen years in higher education administration in a variety of institutional contexts, I remain firmly committed to the role and value of higher education and the generative potential of student interaction with a highly qualified and engaged faculty. The transition to administration is one that encourages a reassessment of what the university means and what the priorities of the university (as opposed to the priority of a single faculty member) ought to be for the near and long term. Indeed, the transition almost requires a recalibration of self: others control your calendar, you pursue collective goals, you endeavor to ensure broad engagement, and you interact with many more parts of the university than you would as a faculty member. As a faculty member, you are ultimately responsible for your professional competence as a teacher, scholar, and servant; as an administrator, you are responsible for collections of people ensuring their competencies as well as the systems that provide the infrastructure and parameters for the work.

As an administrator, perhaps unlike many faculty and staff, I must also attend to those external forces: at once cultivating change of the sort that is often resisted within universities and articulating the strongest possible case for investment from those in government as well as those interested in philanthropic support of the university. The partisan politics that I might pursue in a lecture or professional presentation, or the ideological bent found in my scholarly voice, is necessarily subsumed in the more tactical, politic, perhaps sterile, administrative posture that is a virtual requirement as academic leaders work with stakeholders and legislators who represent the political spectrum and hold the purse strings that make higher education possible. All these dynamics need not be seen as opposites but can be seen as in dynamic tension. However, all too often the interplay within university operations plays out like a series of either/or propositions. And the conflicts that arise from either/or scenarios do not often convey to external audiences an image of academicians at our best.

Moving from the Light into the Dark

It is a common enough joke that moving from faculty to administration is akin to “going over to the dark side of the Force” in the *Star Wars* movies. Having made that move, I can attest that changes do occur—not simply because of the increased sensitivity to pressures from the public, governing boards, and accrediting bodies, among others, but because the work is fundamentally different. As a faculty member my focus could be, in relatively equal terms, my students, my research, and my colleagues (department). These are relatively internal considerations. In hindsight, I took it for granted that there would be a computer replacement program, travel funds, summer research programs, phone jacks, paper. Indeed, there was great frustration when the whiteboard had no marker or the library took seven rather than the

normal three days to get my material. I do not want to convey that these are minimal concerns—these were the significant concerns that governed how, day-to-day, I would be able to accomplish what I was hired to do.

Yet it took me less than one year to experience how different administration could be. In the immediate post-9/11 environment my state's revenues tanked and the state government came after all state agencies, including the universities (which several years earlier a previous governor had identified as one of the four horsemen of the cultural apocalypse). I recall vividly seeing my state-allocated budget zeroed out, with the admonition that I should seek to prioritize activities (all in support of the academic mission of the colleges and departments) and generate revenue that did not come from the state. For many faculty, the world of entrepreneurial higher education, seeing new academic programs as product development and giving thanks to fees (such as a graduate application fee that will fund your operation after the state budget gets zeroed out) is a different and often times disconcerting reality. You see, in administration there are fewer opportunities to take things for granted; an administrator is always attuned to how and what can be taken away from you (individually and collectively) and, as a consequence, must care and nurture the opportunities to acquire resources to keep the operation—whether it is a department, a college, or a university—afloat. There are better and worse ways to this administrative work we lump under leadership, but it is generally foreign to the ways we learned how and why to become a faculty member.

As I see and experience it, one of the great changes in academic labor over the last decade is that so much has been taken away, particularly in public higher education, that the security of focusing on what is immediately in front of you—your students, your research, your committee assignment—has been taken away. If it was at all possible in the past, it is hardly possible now to shield faculty and programs from the vicissitudes of poor budgets and ideological posturing at the state and federal levels. We are all now subject to regimes of governance that tax our ability to respond comprehensively as a university. As a consequence, and in what often feels as an assault on shared governance, the university's full-time, twelve-month employees—the administration and its staffers—work to formulate the responses that best position the university moving forward. The result is often a productive response to the external threat, but an internal schism tends to grow as the either/or of choice making occurs. In the context of shared governance, there are better and worse approaches to make decisions, but for faculty members focused on their own teaching, research, and service, the real fear that they may lose something in the process, either as a result of shared decision making or by administrative fiat, is the stark reality of limited finances and limited flexibility.

Therein lies an obvious difference between my life as a tenured faculty member and that as an administrator appointed "at will." In the former I presumed that my life would be relatively stable and the professional trajectory linear. As an administrator I am keenly aware that the future is far less predictable and that each day may be my last in the role I currently occupy (though, thankfully, this university offers a tenure home). There are clear differences when one is keenly aware of the external threat and the experience of a faculty member who presumes that it is someone else's responsibility to ensure that there is enough in the budget for everyone to accomplish their tasks. But what happens when the available budget isn't enough to sustain every program or faculty member's goals?

The Job Used to Be Better

When I left Arizona for Minnesota some crises ago, I recall an early meeting with a disciplinary colleague now doing the noble work of leading a large state comprehensive university. At a luncheon we were catching up, and she asked what I was doing. My response was that I had moved to a different institution and was fully entrenched in an administrative role (as a dean). Her response was that of congratulations and lament; she recalled that her impression was that I was a passionate teacher and engaged scholar. My reaction was to choke on the roast beef in front of me. I had been that faculty member, and experiencing that passion and engagement was what originally drew me to the professoriate and the life of the mind. The comment was supportive, but the existential crisis was palpable; I had given up a passion, a dream that had fueled me for many years, and an occupation that I found rewarding, noble, and a good fit. And, now several years later, there are enough lingering doubts about the move to administration that I still try to avoid roast beef because of its association.

After I became a “higher” dean at a different school in the throes of significant financial challenges, I met with a senior faculty colleague who lamented that being a faculty member was easier and better decades earlier. Indeed, technology, innovation, and increased and differential work demands have taxed why she (and I) both entered the profession of university educator and researcher. My colleague’s lament was in the context of arguing that we should look back to the traditions and operations that once defined liberal arts education and not toward the new trends and shifting identities among institutions of higher education. Nevertheless, I argued that we could not look back, because that time and culture had shifted; we needed to be more leading-edge and move forward. But moving forward to what? Articulating that affirmative and rewarding vision is the challenge of any college or university executive. Most faculty want to engage but also to preserve the essence of why the job was so attractive to begin with: that life of the mind, of engaging one’s colleagues and one’s students (by the by, I still see that engagement at academic conferences, and I need to confess that my jaded administrative mindset sees it both as prosaically quaint and with a bit of jealousy). As enrollments grow and costs are contained by investing in more contingent faculty, the traditional opportunities to interact with students become more marginalized. So we turn to social media, virtual learning, and group activities to foster engagement. Yet, that past of more intimate, face-to-face opportunities for sharing, mentoring, and advising do not always translate well. Thus, I have seen faculty get discouraged by having to learn new modes of interaction and teaching even as they become saddened by the passing of an era of education that often grew out of the very strengths these faculty brought to the enterprise. Thus, the loss can be felt both in the professional context of work and in a personal sense of displacement and professional marginalization.

Possibly the final and most public erosion of the “good job” memory has occurred most recently in states such as California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and my own Wisconsin, where budget shortfalls and political deal making have conspired to threaten both the compact between the state and higher education and that between the state and its intellectuals who deliver strong value for the educational dollar. Here and now there is no doubt that the “job used to be better.” Much as I use an administrative vocabulary so foreign to what I learned in rhetorical and media studies, now our faculty colleagues have learned to live with phrases such as deallocation, furlough, lapse, “permanent GPR cut,” and, of course, the attendant

assault on wages, benefits, and operational dollars. Middle management becomes decidedly neutral on labor and collective bargaining while the faculty, both tenure-track and contingent, struggle with responses that are both affirmative and protective of the personal finances and professional position. Faculty turn to their deans and provosts to be their leaders, and yet we struggle with the dichotomy between our academic responsibilities and managerial roles. As a provost, I am a state employee, but my job is in executive management; thus, where do my alliances lie? Is it with a government that will make the work of sustaining the public university more difficult? Or is it with the faculty member threatening me with unionization as I peer over his shoulders and read the various Marxist titles that informed my research agenda? In the end, the work of both the administrator and the faculty member is united in the desire to support certain core values associated with education. Those values, however, can be disrupted by the tactical, political, and pragmatic elements that drive both faculty and administrators to make compromises to ensure that they can sustain themselves in this challenging environment. To echo my now former faculty colleague, the job definitely did seem a lot better two decades ago when I entered the professoriate.

The Future

And so, that seemingly great divide in discourse, culture, and mentality that supposedly separates the administration and faculty has been bridged by crisis. We, as academic leaders, can no longer shield our campuses from the cuts, absorbing them through supposed slush funds or reserves that have been built on the backs of faculty labor; rather, we face them together but perhaps continue to see them from different perches. Together we must face a reality that seems so much different from the one I thought existed when I became a faculty member in a small Communication Studies department. In this new environment, faculty members and administrators are challenged with "the increased focus by policy makers and the public on accountability and governance transparency. Institutions are no longer simply trusted to deliver their missions. Instead they must demonstrate value for public investment" (Eckel & Kezar, 2006, p. 3). Responding to this new context for higher education is no doubt unsettling and too unpredictable for some, but if it is to be accomplished well it must be through the collective work of management and labor, the former acknowledging the challenges that confront faculty in terms of their values and identity and the latter coming to grips with the fact that the work is indeed different and may not necessarily be better.

In the end, higher education will persist through various institutional contexts, but there is uncertainty about how many and what sorts of programs these institutions will provide and what they will look like. We may not be in ruins, but without a successful engagement between the academic mission and the financial plan, the various external pressures can be ruinous to the core of higher education. Nevertheless, just as our students are changing (older, more immigrants, more students of color, greater financial challenges) higher education is evolving and must adapt to a reality where the state may appear to be more hostile, but the broader culture can still be cultivated so that the university and collegiate experience is understood as a powerful and empowering good with intrinsic and extrinsic value. Concomitantly, faculty and administrators should engage each other in the preservation, even as it evolves, of core values of higher education and the material and cultural investment that occur in the pursuit of education. This is collective work that does not result from faculty labor resisting university

leadership or that leadership simply managing its employees. We both can do better, even if the job does not seem better.

How might we do better? Perhaps one obvious place is to define common priorities and reward structures. I have often asked, does the university exist to employ and reward people or does it employ and reward people who support our mission and students? On the surface, we might say we already do the latter. But listen a little more closely to conversations among peers and colleagues who question the professional motives of administrators who pad their résumés with empty initiatives or critiquing peers who fail to deliver across the common domains of faculty work. There is much truth in such quiet conversations, but little of this gets organized in formal ways to transform the university. Thus, perhaps our first collective goal in betterment is to improve the university experience for everyone, prioritizing those activities, rituals, and processes that enhance the intellectual and professional enterprise. Neither faculty nor administration can do such work without each other. Indeed, in perhaps my best and certainly my most formative faculty experience, what struck me as interesting was that many faculty members thought like administrators and many administrators still thought like faculty members. We could therefore argue about best tactics but build on shared values, a collective vision, and mutual trust. In that environment we all felt empowered to think, build, fail, and learn. And, if we think about the learning arc of our students, particularly those who make us feel proud about our work, an environment where we all can think, build, fail, and learn somehow seems better to me.



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