

Academic Labor**IJoC**

Administration in the Neoliberal World

ANONYMOUS

Many have written about the “academic market” (Bousquet, 2008; Sterne, 2009); academic labor in general, and particularly in our field (Miller, 2010; Nelson, 2010); and neoliberalism as it impinges on the academy (Cantor & Courant, 2003; McCarthy, Pitton, Kim, & Monge, 2009; Satterthwaite, Piper, & Sikes, 2009). The role of public education in a democracy is daily attacked or replaced by rhetoric of the self-sustaining university, the student as customer, and education as a product from the academic industry—all of them core elements of neoliberal discourse. Administrators, legislators, parents, and some faculty speak of weaning the public university from public funds—which reads, as it should, intensely contradictorily. Of course this is not the future, but the present and the past, as many universities (including my own) have long since stopped being a public institution, as more and more of our budget comes from undergraduate tuition, online programs, and “partnerships” with the private sector, which I sincerely hope do not reach the level of utter corruption and exploitation detailed in Bousquet’s chapter on UPS (2009). If we define “public” to mean at least 50% city, state, or federal support, then we are definitely a private university using public land to serve an increasingly socioeconomically stratified student body. Moreover, the neoliberal discursive terrain of “responsible” budgets, cost-benefit analysis, breaking even, and turning a profit rears its ugly head at every meeting—not just budget meetings—for every aspect of the educational project, from curricular development to faculty retention, must be weighed against economic efficiency.

Nobody ever told their mommy in the third grade, “When I grow up, I want to be a department head.” Academic administration is the type of job that is seldom the result of lifelong desire, training, or even free will. Administrators are not all the same. I paraphrase for communications scholars Raymond Williams’ insight on masses, that there are no such things as administrators, only ways of looking at people as administrators. In other words, we may all look the same from the outside, and there is a general type given the gendered and racialized composition of the professoriate, but there are many shades of difference, great and small, within our kind. Anthropological inquiry would reveal not only great diversity, but also that “the magical beliefs and practices of the *srotrartsinimda* present such unusual aspects that it seems desirable to describe them as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go” (Milner, 1956, emphasis mine).

Administration Primer: Internal Contradictions

The College Administrator’s Survival Guide (Gunsalus, 2006) includes chapters ranging from “Embrace your fate,” on through “Bullies” and “When not to improvise.” These are spot-on lessons, since, as an administrator, I received training only after becoming one. Nearly all lessons I received included an

explicit internal contradiction: *Do A, but you must remember B, which actually negates A*. This implicit contradiction is neither inevitable nor universal. Rather it is ideological. The contradiction exists and pervades much of the formal and informal training because, in a neoliberal approach to education, the goal is not to inform and produce knowledge to further democracy and social justice, but to effect an economically efficient and—hopefully or hallucinogenically—a self-supporting if not profit/revenue generating unit within a public university system. The tensions arise between a liberatory philosophy of education and the discourse of neoliberalism. Both of these forces are present in a university setting, yet they are not necessarily commensurable unless one equates economic profit with democracy and social justice.

As a professional and social effort to school new administrators, my university holds a day-and-a-half workshop the week prior to the beginning of the term. This is a very difficult time of the academic year for all involved with a university—faculty, administrators, staff, students, parents—therefore, not everyone can attend this workshop. To be fair, there is no ideal time for this training, and logically, aiming for a time when lessons will be fresh in our minds as the new year begins, makes sense. Most who do attend it contend that one major benefit is meeting other administrators across campus, something that can be analogous to meeting a regional network at conference-wide workshops. Meeting other administrators reminds us of the great heterogeneity of personalities, approaches, goals, and resources. I meet other heads whose research can inform my own. By and large, everyone is very pleasant, though I am not sure I would like to be in some of their faculties once I hear them discuss administrative strategies. Moreover, the disparities in funding become painfully evident. For example, I met a lovely colleague in the hard sciences/engineering area whose annual budget, which he controls, was \$60 million for a faculty of 60. A cool million per faculty member! My annual budget, which I do not control, is less than a 60th of that sum for a faculty equivalent of 11.

Lesson #1: Your Faculty is Valuable, Yet They are Likely to Behave as Children.

Nonetheless, despite our unequal budgets and approaches in the contemporary university, the administrative network becomes immediately very important, because one of the first lessons we are told is that we cannot trust our faculty. Indeed, we are told that, if we were previously friends with our faculty, we must learn to question if not entirely abandon that friendship. As one workshop leader told us: “You know how you used to rail against ‘the man?’ Well, now you are ‘the man,’ so get used to it!” This was profoundly unsettling to me, and not only because of the gender dissonance. The immediate hostility built in between administration and faculty is often encased in family rhetoric. Your faculty are like your children, we are told. They will ask for more than they deserve, or they do not know the limits of our wherewithal. That is the more generous side of this family metaphor. On the outright insulting side, we are told that our faculty/children will throw tantrums and have to be managed, seduced, or “incentivized” to behave and produce as we need them to. Incentivization is a favorite neoliberal word that means how to get faculty, and others, to do something without providing additional resources—the classic self-governance without means. My first encounter with this interfaculty relationship set of lessons leaves me amazed, but also explains some of my previous interactions with administrators. This way of thinking helps me understand my predecessors a little differently, in terms of both those who followed it, and those who did not.

Lesson #2: *Balance Your Duties, But Always Favor the Administrative Ones.*

We are thanked by the provost and the chancellor for performing a key function and service to the university. We are told: "You perform the most important job." We are offered wide-ranging workshops, including sessions on "the life cycle of a university employee," instructing us how to shepherd a worker from job search through retirement or dismissal. The Office of Equal Opportunity and Access hosts an "Executive Women's Conversation Group" with lessons on how to balance administrative and family life. Among other things, I am not sure if men are instructed on this, and I suspect more of them are beginning to worry about this balance, but it is certainly something the university sees as a gendered issue. All workshops acknowledge that there will be a tension between one's academic work and administrative work. Possible solutions include blocking out an afternoon to dedicate to one's scholarship. It strikes most of us as indicative of senior administrators' distance from our faculty position that they think a 50% appointment translates to 4.5 days of administrative work and .5 days of research. I am not even sure where teaching figures in all of this. This is more of a 90% appointment, and it is a major part of the reason of why so many administrators find it difficult, if not impossible, to return to research after many years with absolutely no time to do it. Of course, the ramifications are even more drastic if one has assumed administrative responsibility before tenure and is permanently off the research track. This lesson reveals the fact that, despite the departmental administrator remaining a member of the faculty—most of us have only a portion of our appointment redirected toward administrative duties—the reality is that the departmental administrator is assumed to be administrator first and faculty member second, if at all.

Lesson #3: *Be Transparent, But Share Very Little Information.*

Another lesson we learn is that a good leader is transparent in their decision making. Faculty are far more likely to participate and support measures that they understand and feel embody faculty self-governance. We are also reminded that we cannot share information with our former friends, or with anyone on the faculty. We are told not to share information with our partners, either. As most information is private, we are essentially told that we have to share with a very trusted person who cannot legally say we violated confidence. In sum, we are implicitly told that we can only confide in a therapist or a lawyer, as, by this time, we all realize that we cannot confide in university counsel, given that it protects the institution, rather than any individual faculty or department. Furthermore, given that our faculty members are constructed as the children in a family metaphor, it seems prudent not to tell them more than they can understand. Thus, according to faculty guidelines, faculty should exercise a great deal of self-governance. Yet legal and administrative tendencies work directly against transparency.

Even in the face of reduced resources, a democratic and deliberative approach to decision making within reduced circumstances can help the difficult transition into a new situation. Notably—and unlike most discussions that budget-focused deans prefer to have—many of these discussions will involve teaching, mentoring, research, etc. Transparency in departmental procedures brings together faculty, students, and staff. For example, in a student/faculty meeting, doctoral students in my program demanded that examination processes be made more explicit. With the Director of Graduate Studies

(DGS), we met with staff to determine their part in the labor of scheduling and distributing exam materials. We then met with student representatives to gather information about student concerns about the exams. We met with faculty about how to come together in consensus about delivering exams. It turned out that faculty members had a range of approaches to exams. We had to discuss our individual expectations, compare them to the culture of the department, and identify how digital technology altered the rules and expectations that predated this latest communication revolution. As a result, we developed a set of procedures vetted by students and faculty, and distributed to all three groups (students, faculty, and staff) with very specific responsibilities and tasks that everyone had to follow. This was a process we carried out democratically, with deliberation and input. While everyone may not agree with every element of the final guidelines for examinations, everyone knows that they had their input into the process and contributed to the changing guidelines.

Lesson #4: Ask Us for Advice, Yet There is No Recourse Vis-à-vis Administrators.

How do we deal with hostile or unresponsive administrators? How does a department head approach a dean, provost, chancellor, or president? This is a very tricky issue that workshops are fairly clear about. Lines of authority are fixed, and the university administration supports and throws its legal weight behind senior level administrators. We have to learn to get used to those above us in the chain of command. There is no recourse. If we seek advice from the provost's office—the provost being the chief academic officer in a university and therefore the logical adjudicator between a department administrator and a dean—we are told to learn to deal with the dean while being admonished both for ever bringing the matter up, and for having shared or discussed any disagreement with our own faculty. One would not want the dean to feel that her/his faculty is actually meeting to discuss faculty governance and departmental affairs. Conversely, any questions posed to the dean can be answered: "If you do not like what I am doing, I can call in the provost." It is a hermetically-sealed system. In a lighter tone, but no less serious, the provost's staff may suggest that, if a particular dean does not work well, departmental heads could wait it out, as the dean will eventually be promoted. This latter piece of wisdom pretty much explains the widespread presence of less-than-enlightened administrators.

This tension between agency and structure bears itself out in the head's allegiances to faculty and administration, which ought to be consistent, rather than adversarial. Departmental administrators perform an interstitial function as members and representatives of the faculty, in addition to their roles as deployers of mandates and policies from higher-level administrators. The internal contradiction of historical responsibility in the face of continued regulation and control is borne by the departmental administrator, as one simultaneously represents a pseudo-sovereign unit with minimal agency vis-à-vis higher administration. It is as if the system of governance were a mirage. Individual faculty labor under the pretense of faculty self governance. Departmental administrators labor under faculty senate rules of departmental sovereignty. Meanwhile, deans enforce provost, chancellor, or president edicts through the head down to the faculty. The rhetoric of self governance is less powerful than the reality of administrative edict.

How Did I Get Here? Administrative Paths

In my limited experience as an administrator, and in my more extensive experience as the object of administrators, I find that most people rise up to the administrative level through three sets of trajectories. Some are prescient enough to realize, or foresee, that they will eventually achieve the level and seniority that will make them a candidate for an administrative post. Within this group, there are those who steadily build up to this moment as a career goal, along with others who steadily deny any desire for this eventuality. For example, I met a colleague who told me outright, "I am using this job as a stepping stone to a bigger administrative post, such as dean, chancellor, or college president." Another colleague, when beginning his term, confessed that he always knew he would someday fill his post, much to the amazement of the rest of the faculty who were shocked at this unexpected state of affairs. Those colleagues would fall under the group who wants to become an administrator and foreground that element of their careers ahead of others, such as research or teaching. Others in the prescient group are far less willing to assume the role. I know many colleagues who are warily watching the inevitable administrative call come closer and closer. Among this latter group, there are those who will not accept the call, no matter what, and others, who will do it because it is their turn, or because they fear that, if they don't, their group, faculty, or college will not survive the leadership vacuum. Those are just some of the possibilities within the prescient group.

The second, clueless, group (which is so in a good way) includes many productive faculty who, either through sheer engagement with the intellectual side of academia (imagine that!) or cluelessness and marginalization within the politics of their location, do not envision themselves in a leadership position. Many in this group truly believe in a democratic, non-hierarchical workplace. Faculty self-governance remains a guiding force among this group, though as Nelson (2010) documents, it is slipping away in many universities for a range of complex reasons, one of them being that faculty believe, but do not necessarily invest, in it. Some faculties have managed to negotiate a rotating administrative structure, and others have arranged for a committee of the faculty to administer their department. More often, individuals have to take up the position, though they did not prepare for it or anticipate it. People in this second group who become administrators are different from those in the first who wanted to avoid administration, as their avoidance efforts prove futile once they are surprised or ambushed by a *fait accompli*.

The third group is composed of newly promoted senior faculty who immediately must step into an administrative post. Quite troubling, in terms of the academic career and human potential of faculty who have just hit their stride, is the immediate appointment to an administrative position of someone who has just earned indefinite tenure and promotion, i.e., a first-year associate professor. This can happen both in a faculty when senior faculty decline to take up the leadership position, or in a young faculty where the senior faculty are junior associate professors. A head who has just earned tenure is not an ideal situation, either for the head or the unit.

Much less often, but still occasionally the case, is a unit run by a junior faculty member. I have encountered such units, and the costs are incurred both by the unit and the administrator. The unit suffers from not having an authoritative representative who can negotiate as an equal with higher-level

administrators and other department heads who are usually of higher rank. The individual is unable to develop his professional portfolio of publication and intellectual productivity, so s/he is stuck in that rank and often does not receive promotion and tenure, and thus loses her/his job at that location. This is not an advisable situation.

There are many ways that faculty (or others) are appointed to administrative positions. In a well-run department, the successor is almost always evident to most faculty, and certainly is positioned as such by the outgoing administrator. In dysfunctional units, administrative appointment is much less transparent, whether it is protracted or abrupt. Individual faculty members may find themselves in the surprising position of being asked to become administrators, and faculty might be equally surprised to hear who it is that has been newly appointed. In the individualist governmental structure so pervasive in the United States, most departments are administered by a single faculty member from within the department, appointed by the dean, ideally but not always with input from the faculty. "Input" has to be operationalized, as faculty have retained the right to input, but only in an advisory mode. Even so, the previous is becoming an ideal model often honored in the breach, as I personally know or have endured instances of no input from the faculty, a member from another department being appointed with no input from the faculty, and a person not on faculty being appointed as head. The latter was very difficult as, for example, only senior faculty can process tenure and promotion, and a committee had to be established to usher cases in which the non-faculty head could not take a role of leadership and authority. Needless to say, all these scenarios occur in less-than-functional or -democratic units. Unfortunately, the neoliberal moment thrives in obfuscation, hostility, and dysfunction. An important element of transparency ought to be a clear process and consensus about the transfer of power in faculty units.

Clearly, I write from the perspective of a departmental administrator who values faculty, still thinks of herself as a faculty member, and does not see higher levels of administrators as intrinsically adversary. I fear we have lost sight of the fact that a university has two nonnegotiable groups: students and faculty. The university exists to bring these two groups together. Students need faculty, and faculty teach students. Staff also compose an important support role in the smooth-functioning of a university, though not in as intrinsically elemental a role as those of the faculty and students. For instance, you can neither have a university with staff and faculty, but no students; nor a university with staff and students, but no faculty. Sadly enough, I sometimes encounter administrators who seem to suggest one of the two above scenarios, usually the second one. Theoretically, we should all work together to educate our students, treating each other justly in the process. Certainly, the economic downturn and the ongoing neoliberal onslaught on public education effect huge pressures on all who labor in the university. Yet it is neither natural nor universal that as a result of these pressures, hostility should pervade all or most human interactions.

A departmental administrator can strive to mediate his/her embattled role with a degree of humanity insofar as there are other groups and mechanisms within and without the university to support such an effort. Faculty unity certainly helps morale and productivity. A faculty that can focus on the important task at hand—teaching and research—in a climate of respect and collaboration is able to achieve much more than one mired in speculation, backstabbing, and fear.

For example, staff pooling sometimes physically moves the person, adds to her duties (staff remain mostly female), and displaces labor onto faculty and students—all without any demonstrable savings, but with decreased job satisfaction and lowered morale. Faculty input might have devised a more cost-efficient and humanly supportable strategy, but this is not the path followed. It is very difficult for faculty and students to see the university expand its highly paid upper administrative layer, adding virtual systems that do not necessarily serve faculty or students and the cost of which is immense, reducing faculty and student service budgets, all the while increasing tuition and holding faculty salaries steady or cutting them through measures such as involuntary furloughs. The challenge to a departmental administrator in these times is how to navigate these turbulent streams while keeping in mind that there cannot be a university without faculty and students, attempting to sustain a respectful engagement with higher levels of administration without incurring their wrath, and working with the faculty to chart a course that protects educational integrity while safeguarding survival. Through it all, I keep remembering what one of my valued faculty members—a colleague, a friend, and not a child—said to me when I first became head. He told me: Just think of what that previous head would do, and do the opposite. This remains the single most useful piece of advice and training I have received as an administrator.

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