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Layout: POULIOT GUAY GRAPHISTES
Copy editor: PATRICK ROYCROFT
Proofreader: PATRICK ROYCROFT
Printer: ALLEN PRESS

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elementsmagazine.org

Elements
An International Magazine of Mineralogy, Geochemistry, and Petrology

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RETURN FROM THE "DARK SIDE"

1811-5209/17/0219-\$0.00 DOI: 10.2138/gselements.13.4.219

In 2004, I assumed an administrative role in my university, thus joining what is commonly referred to as the "Dark Side" of academia. I have only just returned to my position as a faculty member. Some pursue administration as a career path and expect to move up the academic ladder, progressing from department head, to dean, to provost, and, perhaps, even to president. Others, like myself, view administration as an intriguing experiment: I certainly didn't anticipate staying away from a faculty role for so long (almost 13 years). Like many faculty, I had little experience with organizational leadership when I joined the Dark Side. I was like a Padawan apprentice (another reference from *Star Wars*) aspiring to be a Jedi and greatly in need of master Yoda's training.

I share below what I have learned from my experience, not only for those considering a position in academic administration but also for others to gain an appreciation of this important role:

- Administrators create an atmosphere that allows faculty members to exercise their dreams and accomplish their goals. This is accomplished by taking care of the day-to-day routine administrative tasks that ensure the smooth running of a department. As a former Dean told me, it is like "making sure there is toilet paper in the bathroom".
- The pace and workload that an administrator handles is unrelenting. E-mails, reports, budgets, and phone calls come in steadily. You will always have an internal list of things that must be done right away, projects to start, and projects that you should start. To be successful, an administrator needs to prioritize and to balance output versus perfection.
- Administrators operate within an organizational unit. Life will no longer be as flexible as when you were a faculty member. You will have a supervisor to whom you will report on a regular basis. You, in turn, will supervise administrative and/or technical staff. You are held accountable for both the good and the bad of your unit.
- As an administrator, you will develop a new network of relationships. This network will be invaluable when you are troubleshooting an unfamiliar problem, but it may also mean that you may have to work with people who drive you crazy. As Yoda would advise, "Patience you must have, my young Padawan."
- Administrators have to make decisions in a timely manner. You will need to address issues before they become emergencies by being in close touch with your faculty and staff. Results need to be communicated to all involved.
- Administrators need to think "outside-of-the-box". Just when you think you have seen it all, a new and strange problem appears that demands a unique solution. Being a troubleshooter and producing practical solutions is the most creative part of an administrative assignment.
- Administrators are often expected to get deeply involved in conflict... not by instigating it (!) but by helping to resolve it.



Nancy L. Ross

■ The work of administration can be isolating. You will receive much advice and criticism from your colleagues, you will be scrutinized for favoritism and be privy to much confidential information. You must make decisions regarding hiring, promotion, and firing. These can be tough. To be an effective administrator you must be able to separate your administrative self from your personal self.

■ Administration will affect your scholarship. Maintaining an active research program will require forethought. For example, I maintained an active research program by negotiating for a postdoctoral position, but I had to cut back on supervising graduate students.

■ An administrator derives great satisfaction from their faculty and staff's achievements. Their successes drive an administrator to willingly deal with the daily grind and to tackle the challenges that arise. Yet, when the day arrives when you wake up in the morning and you are no longer energized by your role in administration, you know that it is time to step down. Realize that your achievements are a step in the dynamic evolution of your unit and work to ensure a smooth transition for whoever takes over your role. Take pride that you consistently gave the very best you had.

Having read this, you might ask who would want a position in academic administration. The good news is that the Dark Side isn't that dark. I have found that most academic administrators are accomplished and talented individuals who care passionately about their organization. They work incredibly hard on behalf of their faculty to improve their institution. The experience and breadth of knowledge that you gain as an administrator will assuredly expand your horizons. You will also have an opportunity to bring transformational change to an academic unit. For example, the visionary administrative leadership of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute (now known as Virginia Tech, USA) in the 1960s actively recruited the very best and so transformed the Department of Geology into a mineralogical powerhouse with a "cluster hire" that included Donald Bloss, Jerry (Gerald V.) Gibbs, and Paul Ribbe (see the tribute to Paul in this issue of *Elements*).

So, as I finish my grand experiment from faculty member to academic administrator and back to faculty member, I am invigorated from all that I have learned. If you would like a position in which you can create change, that brings challenges, that calls upon problem-solving skills, and if you have good organizational skills, patience, listening and peace-making skills, then I urge you to undertake your own grand experiment of going to the Dark Side. Especially these days, there is a critical need for effective academic administrators in science.

Nancy L. Ross, Principal Editor