

THE PERILS OF ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATION: GATEKEEPING, ACADEMIC FREEDOM, AND CORPORATIZATION

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The following narrative is an account of one social work educator's experiences in higher education administration. Three areas of concern are explored: gatekeeping, academic freedom, and the corporatization of academia. The author discusses issues unique to educational administration, given the challenges for growth and funding, and the organizational weaknesses imbedded in such institutions.

I have been in higher education the majority of my career, with occasional stints returning to the practice community: once to explore the role of state citizens' organizations and the extent to which social workers could be involved as staff; and second, to join the campaign staff in a colleague's efforts to become Governor. Both experiences were highly challenging and informative. I observed the rise and fall of the state citizen action movement (derailed by bankruptcies, campaign irregularities, and misuse of funds, to name a few). My guy won the governorship, and I had the pleasure to work in his administration. Both also greatly impacted me to continue as a social work educator and to keep my hands active in within the world of politics.

When I returned to academia, I was encouraged by a number of women colleagues to explore moving up in the ranks of higher education administration, notably into a position of dean or director. The growth in the number of programs had been profound and surely, there seemed to be opportunities for women to move into those roles. Admittedly, my knowledge of my good friends' experiences served initially to dissuade my interest in such a move: difficult jobs; contentious faculty; ongoing budget/resource issues; dwindling interest and

applications for enrollment; increased competition with newer programs; accreditation issues, and on and on. My colleagues also noted problems with survival, with the average tenure in such roles to be between 3 and five years.

In time, I finally crossed the line from being in a comfortable senior faculty role to deciding I would test the waters as an administrator. Upon looking at geographic considerations and manageability of a program, and the fact that my adolescent daughter was open for a change, I narrowed my interests to exploring the New England region. I also wanted to move from a large state land-grant university where the emphasis was on athletics and research (in that order), to an institution where there would be more of a balance between teaching and scholarship. Given the appeal of fresh seafood, easy access to the ocean, skiing and the mountains, and coming to know all of my colleagues in a smaller setting, I was nonetheless confronted early on, by challenging but interrelated dilemmas which struck at the heart of my role and duties as an academic administrator: (1) gatekeeping for the profession; (2) issues of academic freedom; and (3) the corporatization of higher education.



Gatekeeping

Shortly after my arrival to my new position, I discovered the presence of two students who had prior convictions for serious felony offenses and had withheld such information during the course of their admissions. The prior offenses became known only after the students were reported in separate but similar events which required investigation. I was confronted by a number of questions. Had there been deception? Were there reasonable explanations/evidence that both had been “rehabilitated,” and had served their time? Had faculty or staff known of their prior records and failed to disclose such information? Did such prior information serve to determine the “worthiness” of the students in terms of their potential as practitioners? What further confounded the situation was the fact that while the other offenses were committed before seeking entry to the school, both individuals were involved in similar incidents while currently enrolled.

As I began to gather information, I quickly learned that our admissions materials did not require disclosure of such information. Nowhere in the application packets were there questions related to prior criminal records, revocation of licenses, and the like. In fact, during an interview, one of the students stated that he chose our school because such disclosure was not required. Both of these situations required enormous time and resources in weighing the facts, seeking the advice of legal counsel, working with university administration determining that students were entitled to their due procedural and substantive due process, and hope that satisfactory outcomes would be achieved.

In both circumstances, I recommended dismissal from the program. My recommendations were subsequently upheld, with no further legal action. In my new role, those experiences proved invaluable in my gaining experience in dealing with those

matters which go beyond grades in determining a student’s fate.

After those first months, I discovered that such issues are a regular part of the job and required incredible thoroughness and attention to details and facts, immense documentation, advice and assistance of individuals in the legal arena, strict adherence to confidentiality despite whatever was being said “on the street,” knowledge of university processes, state and federal laws, and a willingness to make tough decisions. Also, they require enormous time. One major source of frustration is always in trying to make decisions in the absence of documentation. If anything, electronic communication via email has probably saved many of us in trying to recreate documented interactions between various parties involved in adversarial circumstances.

With the above all said, I also suggest that we do not become overly hyper-vigilant regulating/monitoring student conduct, nor should we rule in absolutes. Context and circumstance are important—a prospective student being forthright and honest as to his or her history may well receive different consideration compared to one who intentionally sought to deceive. Time from the original event with no further legal entanglements may also serve as evidence that an individual may be considered as a viable candidate. Students are indeed learners and are not perfect. There are scores of opportunities to transform such missteps into teaching moments which will lead to student growth.

Academic Freedom

Once you think you have cleared one hurdle related to controversy, another comes along and poses even more challenges. The dismissals related to criminal convictions seem pretty straightforward, considering the more complex situations emanating from the events of 9/11; issues of freedom of expression,

diversity of views, and growing political conservatism.

What commitment do we have to the profession's code of ethics when we see an ever-growing number of students who do not support concerns related to equality and diversity? For me, this is one of the most troubling issues confronting us in social work education—do we not have a commitment to filter out those who do not support the core underlying values of our profession? Schools of social work and universities are learning environments, and I do believe it is our role to help students reexamine their values, become critical thinkers, and be better informed. Especially in the wake of 9/11, the ever-growing political conservatism we experience has indeed tempered our social advocacy role.

I recently attended a conference on academic freedom that had been sponsored on campus in the wake of attention to a particular faculty member's comments related to gays and lesbians in an economics class. The comments resulted in student complaints, disciplinary action by the Provost, and subsequent overruling by the President. The purpose of the forum was to have open discussion as to how to have both academic freedom and inclusivity. The conference forced me to review the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) statement on academic freedom which stated that:

Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties.

Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not introduce into their teaching controversial matter that has no relation to their subject.

College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence, they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution (1940).

Notwithstanding, faculty have been subject to judicial review regarding expressing their views not only in class but as citizens. One case I am reminded of occurred in the 1950s involving the court case of Paul Sweezy who was investigated by the New Hampshire Attorney General as to his alleged involvement in subversive communist activities (*Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, 354 US 234 (1957), his refusal to answer specific questions related to the content of his lectures, and whether or not he offered an opinion as to advocate for Marxism. Sweezy refused to answer the questions stating that they infringed upon his 1st Amendment rights. While held in state court to be in contempt, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the decision, citing that to:

...impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation. No field of education is so thoroughly comprehended by man that new discoveries cannot yet be made.



Particularly is that true in the social sciences, where few, if any principles are accepted as absolutes. Scholarship cannot flourish in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die.

Further, the court noted the Open Universities in South Africa policy on the four essential freedoms of a university – “to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study.” The fourth and final point, given the pressures to make adequate enrollments and the rising acceptance rates at many of our schools, poses an interesting dilemma when it comes to admitting students whose values conflict with those of the profession. How many of you have heard the statement, unfortunately more often than not, “I’m here to get my degree, but I don’t believe any of that stuff”? I fear too often.

It is true that issues related to academic freedom rest not only with faculty, but students as well. Other than institutional policies regarding student conduct, students do not have access to guidelines such as those by AAUP. The challenges of classroom discourse, taking into consideration multiculturalism and the need to making the academic environment an open and accepting one are becoming increasingly difficult. As an administrator, I have had to deal with classroom situations which led to disruption, divisiveness, and the creation of oppressive, silenced environments. Increasingly, we are all required to staff our classes with adjuncts, many of whom are wonderfully talented people. However, the significant growth of a contingent faculty has hindered efforts at quality control. Many part-time instructors are

in and out of the classroom, teach at night, and it may be weeks for an incident to surface—in the meantime, it has seethed and simmered, unbeknownst to me or other faculty. Potentially disruptive situations, often filled with hateful discourse require unique skills in order to de-escalate. Unfortunately, most of our faculty generally, and adjuncts specifically, are not provided the necessary teaching “tools” or skills. Close to half of all university/college faculty are now adjunct. While adding to the difficulties of balancing academic freedom with responsible conduct, this also leads to my third peril, that of the corporatization of academia.

Corporatization of Higher Education: The End of Academia as We Know It

I don’t need to spend a lot of time talking about the role of corporate America. Nonetheless, speaking as an academic administrator, I fear this trend may well spell the doom of higher education as we know it. Universities have grown dependent upon the corporate sector for financial support and within university administrations there is now more of a mentality to manage for the bottom line. Growth is predicated upon where there is the greatest opportunity for funding rather than support for the liberal arts, professional education, or even educational enlightenment.

Within the social work field I make the following observations which have had profound impacts on how I try to manage a program: (1) the significant growth in part-time faculty is eroding the quality of education in many of our programs; (2) the presence of a large percentage of adjunct faculty in institutions impacts upon faculty governance, in terms of reducing the proportion of tenured and tenured track faculty who engage in faculty governance, and denying adjuncts from participating in the process; (3) such a trend will continue given the dearth of new faculty coming out of our doctoral programs; (4) rising expectations within universities regarding

tenure is reducing the proportion of faculty becoming tenured; and (5) the use of part-time faculty is creating a separate class of cheap labor employees within academia—those with low pay, high enrollment classes, no benefits, and no voice.

If such trends continue, we are faced in the future of having our institutions largely staffed by part-time employees with little or no financial security, with many services outsourced (as evidenced by food services, book stores), and a shift in the balance of power from faculty to the administration. National AAUP data demonstrates the significant decline in membership. If I were starting my career with a new Ph.D., I am not certain that academia, as I now know it, would be my first choice.

Managing Amidst Marginality: Looking Back, Thinking Ahead

When I got into this field, it was during a time of turmoil and excitement. I jumped into my profession committed to overcoming everything, no matter what it was. Like so many others, I wanted to make a difference. Of course, back then, I didn't think we would ever have anything worse than then-President Nixon. It goes without saying that I no longer hold my breath.

My graduate education prepared me well for my career in academia, but only to a point. It surely did not prepare me for the unique organization and function of an academic institution. I have to note that working at a university is beyond anything anyone on the outside would imagine because of the politics, unwritten rules, turf, elitism, and the incredible need to spend enormous time and energy disagreeing over the most trivial issues of absolutely no consequence. An old friend once commented to me that we went into academia because we couldn't make it on the outside. There are days when I do think his remarks hold true. Would we be any better than the Bush Administration if we had been put, as a

collective, in charge of FEMA? I think not. It is true that we work in stodgy, traditional institutions which are not terribly innovative or change-embracing. While the demand is on diversifying external funding, our research/administrative infrastructures are weak and understaffed. The extent to which we contribute to knowledge building is not timely and at best, iffy. A colleague and I conducted research on the trends and status of social work programs and submitted the manuscript to a major social work journal almost a year ago. It took us a year to accumulate the data of all schools accredited in 2003, and develop the manuscript. To date, we have not received any feedback. Should we receive a favorable review, I anticipate it will require editing, and by the time the article may be in print, it will probably be 2007, if we're lucky. Will it be considered current? Probably not.

I've often wondered why it is that no one can ever give an earnest non-tenured faculty member a truthful answer regarding the loaded question, "What do I need to do to get tenure?" In the name of academic freedom, we covertly force beginning faculty to imagine the worst thoughts of their fates as they are placed in the hands of those colleagues who have already ventured safely over to the other side – tenure. In the name of tenure and security, we tell them to put faculty governance and teaching aside: they just need to publish. To the wayside go those things once coveted – academic freedom, faculty governance, the pursuit of, and passing on of knowledge.

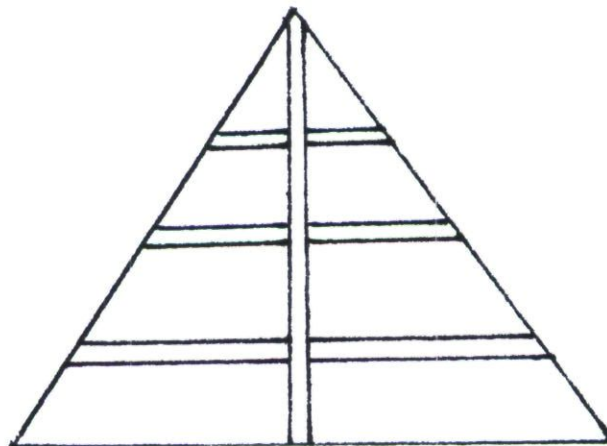
In closing, I have to say if there are notes to pass on to others who choose to enter the waters of academic administration, they are simple ones: don't take yourself too seriously; surround yourself with competence; find other avenues for growth and exploration (I now have my golf handicap down to 18); have a life outside of academia; you're never too old to take risks (I'm now directing a program in Las Vegas, the fastest growing city in the

country and, we don't have admission problems); last, try to convince at least one other fool that this is the greatest kind of job in the world.

References

- American Association of University Professors(1940). *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*. November 7-8.
- Sweezy vs. New Hampshire, 354 US 234 (1957).

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