

# BELEAGUERED? BE DAMNED! BE GONE!

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*At the insistence of colleagues, the author reluctantly assumed administrative responsibilities for his school of social work, giving up the teaching and research duties he truly enjoyed. In this narrative, the author shares some of his experiences (not all enjoyable) in that position; the mismatch of his own interests with the position's responsibilities, and his eventual resolution of the problem – read that 'resignation from the position'. Forget Vini! Vidi! Vici! More apropos is Beleaguered? Be Damned! Be Gone!*

My professional career has spanned a quarter of a century. I began with four years of military service that included many social work functions. Since then, I have almost always maintained a dual focus on practice and teaching. I have provided chemical dependence and mental health services, and have many years of experience as a part-time faculty member in social work and non-social work academic programs.

Most of my work as a service provider was at the administrative level. Most of the teaching involved multiple academic programs. One semester I taught in three different programs, in two states, on the same day. I had semesters when, in addition to my administrative responsibilities, I taught as many as five classes – mornings, evenings, and weekends. After many years of this insanity, often feeling like the donut commercial guy on television who met himself at his own front door one day saying, "It's time to make the donuts!", I finally realized that what paid the bills was the administrative work, but what fed my soul was the teaching. With that revelation, it was time to make changes. I decided to follow my passion, not a paycheck. I significantly reversed the balance of my activities. I became a full-time academic, still providing services to chemical dependence and mental health programs on a part-time or consultation basis, but receiving an overall smaller paycheck. I couldn't have been happier.

Over the next few years I increased my scholarship, made presentations at conferences, whenever and wherever possible, and increased the volume of my publications. At the same time, I focused in on my teaching agenda, finding those few courses that both allowed for use of my knowledge and excited me in anticipation of classes. I was also able to become more involved in service to the school, the university, the community, and the profession. I had, in terms of my own interests, arrived!

During that period, my university began planning reorganization, moving to a college system. With the university reorganization would also come the need for reorganization within the school. In the spring two years before these changes had to be made, some of my faculty and staff colleagues began to suggest to me that I was the likely choice to become the Director of the School, replacing the former Dean. I had no interest in assuming any administrative responsibilities again; remember, "I had arrived!", so to reinforce that point that fall I moved my office from the university campus to an off-site location 85 miles away where the School also offered its program. The following spring more of my faculty colleagues pressed the importance of me assuming the Director position. That fall I replied by moving my office to an even more remote off-site location, 109 miles away. The next spring even more of my colleagues pressured me to take the Director position. I acquiesced.

That fall I became the first ever Director, School of Social Work. I still had a faculty appointment with some teaching responsibilities, but was essentially an administrator, again! The appointment was for three years, with possible reappointment for two additional three-year terms.

The first year can best be described as the traditional “honeymoon” and one of adjustment to my new responsibilities. I knew my faculty, professional staff, and support staff colleagues; I knew the school; I knew the university; and I knew the university administration. I also knew that some of those relationships would go through natural and predictable changes, given my change in title and responsibilities; that I now had to be in my office on a full-day basis daily; that I had to have, or be able to get, answers for any and all questions that were raised, and to find resolution to all problems that would undoubtedly arise; and that I would be teaching, presenting, writing, and providing services to agencies less than before.

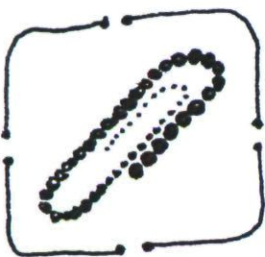
But I was a social worker, and social workers have a commitment to the value of service. This was my opportunity to provide service to the school. I also felt an ethical obligation to my colleagues and my employer. I had no plans to serve three, three-year terms, but I thought I would serve two, which would end with the date of our next CSWE reaffirmation visit. That seemed like a reasonable and manageable length of time to serve as Director. Then I’d end my administrative career, again! Remember, I took a significant salary cut several years ago to leave administration to teach.

One of the more interesting events in that first year came with the hiring of a local, retired social worker who had served as a part-time instructor for the School. He was appointed to a half-time position as Assistant to the Director and placed in the office next to mine. One day shortly after he started his new position, as I came into the School he said the secretarial staff had received a large

shipment of office supplies, many of which they gave to him for his office. He said it felt like Christmas. Within five minutes he came to me to say that we didn’t have to provide the reindeer to make it quite so much like Christmas. His office and mine have windows that open into a very large window well; we are one level below ground. Apparently a young deer had wandered out of the woods near campus, was startled by a car while crossing the street, ran through the parking lot behind our building, jumped down into the eight foot deep window well, and was looking in at him through his window.

The second year was pretty successful and essentially what I should have been able to predict it would be, given my many prior years of administrative, although admittedly non-academic, experience. I did miss the teaching, scholarship, and service commitments I had to curtail. I also found myself having to be increasingly flexible, creative, and able to deal with ambiguity as I could never be sure what, or who, would pop up on any given day, taking my attention away from the “to do” list I walked into my office with each morning. One saving grace is that I’m a very early riser. Given that, I’m generally in my office somewhere between 6:00 and 6:30 a.m. every day, two to two and a half hours before anyone else arrives. This is usually the time to get to yesterday’s “to do” list and make today’s, which I’ll probably get to tomorrow; again, I feel like “It’s time to make the donuts!” I began to refer to the daily uncertainty as “putting out brush fires.” Hearing me say that, one of my colleagues gave me a small red and gold placard emblazoned with “Fire Extinguisher”; it was hung above my head, behind my desk.

Fortunately, I genuinely like my faculty, professional staff, and support staff colleagues, the other university personnel I deal with daily, and the university administration. Nonetheless, I was increasingly feeling beleaguered, besieged, and beset. What I don’t like is the necessity



to be increasingly flexible, creative, and able to deal with the daily ambiguity. After all those prior years of administrative experience, I finally came to realize that I don't like, or at least am not good at, handling details. I tend to see things from the top down; this job necessitated a bottom up perspective. I spent much too much time putting out brush fires; arranging schedules and calendars (which usually were rearranged by higher level administrators); and putting together budgets (although there was only one school, I eventually realized I was responsible for seven or eight budgets – see, even that detail escapes me!).

During the summer between my second and third years I was fortunate to combine two of my passions: presenting my scholarship and traveling. I attended and made a presentation at an international conference in Scotland. The week I was away gave me time to make my presentation, see some sights, relax a little, and reflect a lot. There was no doubt that I would go back to the university and announce to the faculty at the September faculty meeting that I was stepping down from my position to return to full-time teaching at the end of my third year as Director. I immediately felt relief – Beleaguered? Be Damned! Be Gone!

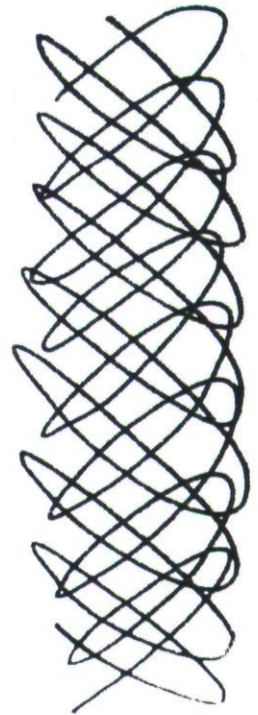
Apparently I was much more convincing in delivering my message of resignation than I had been some five and four years earlier when I said I did not want to be the Director. Some of my colleagues tried to convince me of the appropriateness of staying on as Director, usually only once each. It appears my commitment to stop serving was more palpable than my initial commitment to not serve.

My third and final year as Director has been enlightening. I frequently feel more beleaguered, besieged, and beset than in the prior two years but, drawing insights from my clinical skills, I have no doubt I'm making my own departure from my administrative responsibilities easier by practicing a number

of psychological defense mechanisms (e.g., denial and minimizing) to an extreme. I've also been practicing the strengths perspective in my daily functioning, drawing upon my inherent strengths, perhaps in part my ability to practice those same defense mechanisms.

My predecessors were Deans, with administrative appointments. I was Director, with a faculty appointment. My predecessors had authority appropriate to their administrative responsibilities, reporting to the Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA). I report to the Dean, College of Health and Human Services, who reports to the VPAA. Decisions previously made by my predecessors now must be approved by the Dean. Their authority was supported by their administrative position. As a faculty colleague, I had no true administrative authority. Lacking that administrative authority forced me to succeed based upon my ability to earn my colleagues' trust and their good will. I know I always had that, as that was at least part of the reason they asked me to take this position in the first place. They are all good people, but imagine sustaining cooperation from close to thirty faculty, professional staff, and support staff colleagues, frequently all of a different mind. Does the phrase "herding of cats" have meaning for you?

This final year has been very eventful. I assumed my twelve-month notice of intent to step down would compel the administration to initiate a search quickly. I was wrong. The administration first hoped someone from the current faculty would step forward. No one did. Then there was debate about the structure of the position as it was to be advertised, which led to an increasing delay. I found myself wondering if this was a stall tactic to see if I might change my mind. If so, it didn't work. Eventually a search was begun, but ended unsuccessfully. Now what? I guess my adamant stand was believable, as my colleagues and the administration began to scramble to come up with an alternative arrangement for the upcoming academic year.



In the end, the VPAA came to me to discuss “an out of the box” alternative. Her suggestion was to ask one of my colleagues who had announced he would retire after the next academic year to become one of two Co-Directors for his terminal year, while we did another search based upon a revision to the position that would make it administrative again. That was a no-brainer as he certainly had all of the qualifications, knew the situation, and was respected by staff, faculty, and administrators. The other Co-Director was to be the university’s Director of Graduate Admissions who, until one year previously, had served for many years as Director of Admissions and Advisement for the School of Social Work, serving two prior Deans, acting essentially as Associate Dean, without the title. She would move back into the office that she had vacated just a year before when she assumed her university-level position. The match of the proposed Co-Directors’ individual skill sets and knowledge of the School, the University, and our students was perfect for the job, and they had a long successful history of working together as a team, as they had not only been colleagues in the School of Social Work over many years, but were husband and wife. I thought the idea had merit, so I supported it. It was a positive step and it didn’t involve me extending.

The plan for the following year meant that I could use the summer to finish up all of my responsibilities and still take my four-week summer vacation. Although I did manage to stay away from campus for those four weeks, it was hardly a vacation. I spent several hours each day dealing with e-mail, checking phone messages, hiring and finalizing contracts for part-time faculty members for the fall, and creatively providing coverage for a last minute faculty resignation. Beleaguered? Yes, but Be Damned! I knew I would still soon Be Gone! Actually, not that I would Be Gone! but the administrative responsibilities would be.

I moved from my very large, comfortable Director’s office into a much smaller, but psychologically much more comfortable, faculty office. Actually, I switched offices with my colleague who was replacing me. I was able to purge old files and outdated and otherwise unnecessary books from my bookshelves. This helped the transition into my new space. Almost on cue, I began to get calls from agencies for which I had previously provided consultation and trainings asking me if I was available. It was great to be able to say yes again. For the past three years I had to turn down most requests.

I began to feel less ‘beleaguered’ and more ‘gone.’ My transition back to full-time teaching status is welcomed. I welcome my change of responsibilities. The inevitable change, again, in relationships with my colleagues is also welcomed. Those colleagues held the obligatory dinner that usually means someone is leaving, but in my case only means leaving the position, not the School. I began the process of making the transition of files, as well as the office, to my replacement. I continued to feel much less ‘beleaguered.’ I left the Fire Extinguisher sign hanging behind my old desk. My replacement seemed to understand.

I’ve been winding down this summer. If I had agreed to another three-year term, tomorrow would be day one of year four. As it is, today (honest!) is my last official day as Director, and I’m really looking forward to tomorrow. Beleaguered? Be Damned! I’m Gone! Just maybe, Vini! Vidi! Vici!

P.S.: I’m pleased I was asked to serve, and glad that I did. I left things in good shape for my replacements.

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