

# PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION: DREAM COME TRUE OR NEVER ENDING NIGHTMARE

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*It is a challenge to run any organization. It can also be satisfying and gratifying to get things done with few resources. The ample available literature cannot adequately prepare an individual for the issues encountered in administration. In this narrative, the author describes early-on challenges which remain uphill battles, and includes advice for future administrators in the social work field.*

My secret dream was to become an administrator...to be the boss...to make a difference...I envisioned my name engraved on the door or wing of a building as a testimony of my contributions. After earning the Master's Degree in Social Work, I was employed for two years in a state agency where I worked with people across the spectrum of race, economic background, physical and mental challenges, and needs such as safety, housing, clothing, and food. The experience was great. I was twenty four years old and grew up quickly just to keep up with the on-the-job issues that confronted me.

## **Beginnings and Accomplishments**

The experience confirmed the notion that I would make greater contributions to people and organizations by serving in a decision making capacity. Therefore, I investigated settings in the field of social work where I could make a difference. I found myself in the Human Resources Office of a major historically Black university. What luck! I was hired.

Starting at the bottom of the ladder with instructor rank was no piece of cake. It was a competitive environment. I worked in many areas of the university, serving on various committees, gained excellent student evaluations, and maintained long work hours (8 to 9 hours in the office and then more at home in preparation for the next day). I

volunteered to sponsor a student organization, and supervised field trips and other activities. Each year I did more. Eventually, I gained the respect of colleagues and students. I chartered an honor society for social work students, developed new courses, sponsored workshops, acquired new field practicum sites and wrote a proposal that was approved for a master's degree program in social work for persons who wanted to get a degree near their home town. I played a major role in the accreditation and reaffirmation of the undergraduate and graduate social work programs.

The long trail of "things accomplished" resulted in my appointment as chief administrator of two programs; my secret dream come to fruition. I was on cloud nine with a basket full of things I wanted to do and vulnerable people I had to protect. I felt a need to protect first generation college students who, without guidance, would not stay focused on the goal of graduation; students whose parents put all their hopes and dreams in seeing their child graduate from college; and, lastly, students who only wanted and needed a little help and an opportunity to make it in life. This was easier said than done.

As Chief Administrator or Department Chair (Graduate and Undergraduate Programs) at a small university (fewer than 8,000 students) where the institutional structure is President, Vice Presidents, Dean, Chairpersons and Coordinators, I had two



Coordinators supporting me; one for the graduate program, and one for the undergraduate program. Each program had its own faculty and resources.

### **Committees: Good and Bad**

One of the mechanisms used at universities to get things accomplished is committees. Committees can be good or bad. They are needed but over-used. They can be tremendous “time eaters.” Some committees meet twice per year and others monthly, while others meet several days monthly. It is difficult to refuse committee work when all chairpersons are placed on committees at the university and academic unit level.

The advantage of visibility gained by serving on committees within the university and the division is a plus for my department and me. I became known as a hard worker who got things done. I gained a reputation of commitment and quality work tasks, and could be counted on for good attendance and promptness. Serving on committees with colleagues from other academic units within the larger University provided contact and mentorship with diverse, creative people. I felt not only compelled to work hard on each committee, but to have excellent professional presentation. I wanted to look and act professionally, therefore I “dressed up” for committee meetings.

I was careful to avoid negative talk about the person in charge who called the meeting. Although I was in a panic due to my rush, rush, hectic schedule, I pretended all was well. I sat in an attentive, focused position while my mind was not there, but running through a laundry list of things that I had to do that day, the next day, and even the next week. I realized that I was always overextended, but I felt compelled to serve. Saying “no” was to me unforgivable and would be a blemish on my reputation. I had developed as a committed individual who believed in the motto “service is sovereignty.” Needless to

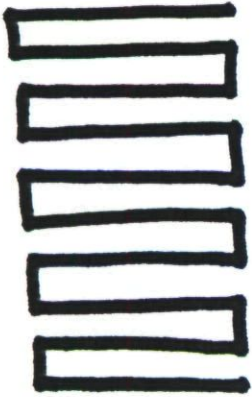
say, my contributions, which were minimal on some committees, led to assignments on more committees. I became convinced that some committees needed “warm bodies” instead of valuable contributors.

Hours of committee work were devoted not only to meetings, but also to writing reports. For example, an Evaluation and Outcomes committee involved looking at each program objective and outcome, as well as making a decision as to which measurement tool would produce the outcome. Researching various types of tools from pre/post tests to focus groups required numerous hours. Another example is the Promotion and Tenure committee, which requires going back and forth to committee meetings to review applications and sign the signature page.

Periodic employee evaluations are required activities as with most organizations. The faculty is to be evaluated annually by the Department Chair. A comprehensive evaluation of each faculty member is forwarded to the Dean of the school and then to the Office of Academic Affairs. Each faculty is judged with respect to rank and duties, considering performance in teaching, research, and service to the unit, school, university, and community.

University policies stating explicitly the requirements of faculty for promotion and tenure are included in the University Faculty/Administrative Staff Handbook. The policies do not require that an application for tenure be submitted after a number of years as a faculty member. Therefore, the faculty member may choose to continue year after year and not apply for tenure. To do so would require evidence of productivity.

“I don’t care about tenure” is the statement from some faculty members. Their desire is to teach their classes, satisfy their office hour requirement, go home, and be involved in little or no committee work. Some faculty remain in this unproductive state for many years without receiving a notice of





termination of service. Few or no contributions are made to the academic unit. As a result, the academic unit has warm unproductive bodies that feel no pressure to produce. These faculty are complacent and satisfied in their current situation and have no desire to progress or to achieve tenure. This attitude hinders the growth of the academic unit and the development of students. Needless to say, it drains the administrator.

### **Accreditation**

Another challenge faced as an administrator is the work, time, and stress required of accreditation reviews. Accreditation is a system for recognizing educational institutions and professional programs affiliated with those institutions as having a level of performance, integrity, and quality that entitles them to the confidence of the educational community and the public they serve (Handbook of Accreditation Standards and Procedures, 2003).

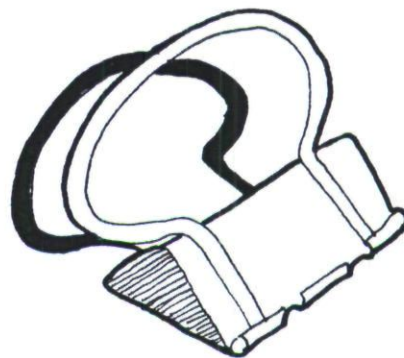
Social work programs are reviewed every eight years. A program review is authorized by the president of the university. A self study describing the program compliance with the evaluation policies and accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education is submitted by the program. It is usually written by several faculty members or by one faculty member with input from faculty. Preparation of the self study document and the site visit is exciting and productive, yet stressful. The program mission, goals, and objectives are reviewed for consistency with the Council on Social Work education policy and standards. Revisions are made as appropriate.

Faculty are often given assignments of sections of the self-study to write. Responses from faculty are rarely submitted in a timely manner. Editing of sections take hours. Coordinating the faculty, students, administrators and community constituencies for the sessions with the site visitors is a

tedious task. The administrator for the program is responsible for the entire activity, including the final editing and mailing of the document. There is pressure to ensure there are no typographical errors, a response to all areas, and submission in a timely manner. Between reaffirmation reviews, things such as evaluation and assessment, reciprocal relations with the community, documenting faculty meetings and review and revision of course syllabi, are forgotten. The administrator has a constant problem of trying to keep all faculty motivated and involved in a systematic, continuous assessment of the program.

### **The Office Environment**

Still another challenge is faculty who cannot seem to get work done due to regular visits by students and colleagues. All too often faculty offices become faculty/student lounges where meals and snacks are being eaten throughout the day. The microwave is humming and the refrigerator door is constantly opened and closed. Coffee and sodas are being offered and served. The round table is lively with loud conversation. Faculty members in the same unit, who are trying to work, close their doors in an attempt to shut out the noise. Students drop in throughout the day to eat and talk about their situations. Faculty seem happy to be available for those who need a sounding board. The difficulty of helping faculty to understand the merit of spending time interacting with students while emphasizing the need to engage in scholarly activities is monumental. It is difficult if and when a faculty member thoroughly enjoys the attention and the company. To have constant visitors is proof of admiration, popularity, and friendship at the expense of making valuable contributions to the academic





unit. In most cases, there is no response from faculty when asked "How do you concentrate on writing a grant, writing a publishable paper, revising a syllabus, creating a course, creating experimental exercises or case studies in the midst of lively conversation?" There is no response, just a bewildered look.

### **The Right Faculty Member for the Job**

Being an administrator carries with it the responsibility of selecting and hiring faculty. Selecting the right faculty is essential to achieving the program's goals and objectives. Qualified, enthusiastic, competent faculty tend to contribute the most to the program. I am always aware of the need to choose faculty carefully and not be fooled by the padded resume. The faculty selected should work well with students matriculating at a historically Black college, keep office hours for availability to students, perform service to the university and the community, and become involved in scholarly activities. In addition, I needed faculty with good, positive attitudes who worked well with other faculty. Working collaboratively with others is essential. It means that the faculty is willing to discuss, listen, debate, and accept different views that might result in consensus decision-making. The individual had to be competent in knowledge, values, and skills, have job experience and membership in professional organizations. He or she must be an effective communicator, capable of communicating verbally and in writing to students, colleagues, practitioners, and the media.

Despite an attempt to capture these qualities in a new faculty member, many times that ideal person is not available. The next candidate does not appear to have a third of the qualities of the number one candidate, but the position must be filled because one fewer faculty member will be evidence of non-compliance to the accrediting board. The pressure to fill the vacant position with the

"second best" might jeopardize the program and become disastrous.

During interviews of new faculty, the commitment, dedication, love for students, passion for advising students, skill in grant-writing and other "love to" activities are a major part of the session. The new faculty comes on board with amazing plans and promises to make a difference in the program. After several months of no delivery, the faculty member announces that acclimation to the new job is difficult, followed by complaints about the university and the students. The faculty member lacks patience in working with students, and tends to blame students for their learning failures. Such instructors convey the clear message: "I'm here for the paycheck and not to give of myself." They achieved the presumed power of being a university professor when they were hired. This type of faculty talked a good game to get in, presented an excellent resume, and references, but at times, seems to be incompetent, pretentious, and lacking in substance.

### **Chain of Command**

As with most large organizations and institutions during the middle 1990s and early 2000, there was an attempt to streamline management. The approach was to eliminate or reduce middle management. This action left a void in the chairperson's ability to effectively manage people. The titles "team leader" and "coordinator" were used to describe these new functions. Despite these titles, the persons in these positions had no authority that would aid them in relieving some of the responsibility of the department chair/dean. Essentially, the department chair/dean was responsible for everything, but had a middle person coordinating efforts with no authority to act. The situation created a greater burden for the chair/dean to not only manage program activities, but also to track the activities of a middle person who over



stepped the bounds of responsibility or did not do enough to make a contribution. In addition, those persons who were supervised by the coordinator realized that this person had no power or authority and therefore tended to overlook them and go to the next higher level. This then produced a strained work environment for the chair, coordinator, and the faculty.

### **Conflict Resolution**

Lastly, one of the most delicate challenges I face as an administrator was being appropriately assertive in resolving conflicts that arose between students and faculty members. The university's customer is the student; however, the faculty member is that person hired to help implement the program needs of the customer and therefore needs the support and backing of the administrator. One must be able to fact find, listen to all parties, and apply a solution that benefits the student and supports the faculty but shows no partiality to either. Solutions and attitude must be diplomatic, firm, appropriate, and justified. There is no way to make these situations work for all parties at all times. I consider myself successful if I am able to get 80-90% to work in favor of all parties. The remaining 10-20% will result in one or more of the parties suffering loss in some aspect. In those cases, I try to minimize the losses, but hold firm on my position in order to maintain consistency and order for the good of the department and the university.

### **A Proactive Approach to Surviving as an Administrator**

Generally, I have not overcome all of the challenges that I have faced over the years. What I have tried to do is establish a daily performance by setting standards, maintaining effective communications with all aspects of the university faculty and staff, nurturing

relationships, and motivating students, staff, and associates alike. Specifically, I have tried to address some of the key issues by taking a proactive approach to create some degree of institutional change.

### **Elements of Approach:**

- Use the University Policy and Procedure manual to the maximum extent possible. Apply the rules across-the-board for all employees without exception.
- Bring attention to higher management that the degree of flexibility associated with employment outlined in the Faculty/Staff Handbook of Policy and Procedures encourages abuse of these policies and procedures.
- Maintain constant vigilance on actions and procedures of all staff members to ensure department goals and objectives are met.
- Take every opportunity to reiterate the reason and purpose of our jobs, in an attempt to keep activities, projects, and programs in their proper perspective.
- Be the example of what should be, on handling various situations, pursuits, purpose, university mission, program, and student support.
- Encourage each faculty and staff member to pursue advanced education and extracurricular activities.
- Employ a delicate balance between micromanagement and self-governed open management principles.

My advice to the starry-eyed, twenty-four-year-old social worker of today is: "Go for it!" The challenges are sometimes overwhelming, but so are the rewards.

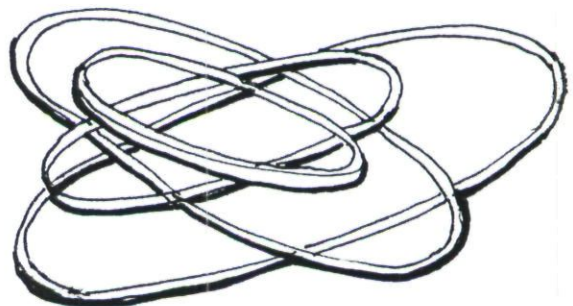
**Here are some things I learned along  
the way**

- You cannot make people do what they do not want to do.
- People are your greatest challenge.
- Expect the unexpected.
- The most difficult part of administration is bridging the gap between providing the service (teaching) and understanding the interaction between the service provider (university/professor) and the recipient (student).
- You can always accomplish more than you think you can with few or no resources if your objective is “I will get it done!”
- Administration and management are not meant for everyone.
- All of the headaches and challenges briefly disappear when that one student or parent comes to you at graduation and says, “Thank you.”

**References**

- Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation. (2003) *Handbook of Accreditation Standards and Procedures* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) Alexandria, VA; Council on Social Work Education.

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