Reflections of a Pracademic:
A Journey from Social Work Practitioner to Academic

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Abstract: This article provides a reflection on the author's transition from an experienced social work practitioner to a full-time academic, i.e. a pracademic. The article provides observations and insights on the unique challenges faced by pracademics in the academic setting. The author provides this narrative to assist pracademics wishing to enter the academy. Also, the article can encourage academic settings to give greater consideration of pracademics for their faculty.

Keywords: pracademic, transition to teaching

This article is a reflection on my transition from full-time social work practitioner to full-time social work faculty member. Some would say this change is not a transition because social practice includes social work education; that is, social work education is an arena of practice (Fox, 2013; Grise-Owens, Owens, Escobar-Ratliff, & Drury, 2015). Yet, this perspective is certainly not mainstream. And, I've only encountered a few individuals who have made this transition to full-time teaching from full-time agency or community practice. I've met even fewer who have done so at a later point in their professional career, with a breadth of experience in community and agency practice. So I share my journey in hopes of encouraging others who are considering a similar transition. I offer observations, insights and recommendations. This is the story of a pracademic.

What is Pracademic?

I choose the term "pracademic" to describe my professional identity. The term pracademic has no clear origin although, interestingly, the term has a Facebook page. A literature review of the term shows its use in several disciplines including public administration (Khademian, 2010), conflict resolution (Susskind, 2013), physical therapy (Coyne, 2007) and criminal justice (Morreale & McCabe, 2011). Some have used the term to refer to a blend of the "practical" with the academic (Lohmann, 2001). Others have used the term to describe a style of teaching that focuses on the practical application of academic theory and knowledge (McDonald & Mooney, 2011). Generally, the term is used to describe an individual or practice that blends practice knowledge with theoretical understanding.

A literature review found no previous use of the term pracademic in the social work literature. However, I think pracademic is particularly applicable to social work education, and by extension, other helping professions. Social work education is a practice-driven profession with a focus on the preparation of professionally trained social workers. Social work education values practice experiences as integral to the curriculum; field education as "the signature pedagogy" highlights this value (CSWE, 2015). Barsky, Green, and Ayayo (2013) found that one of the most pressing needs of social work academic programs are faculty with social work practice experience. Thyer (2000) suggests that social work faculty should be licensed by their respective social work licensing board (which inherently requires social work practice experience).

Hence, "second career" faculty members or pracademics have particularly strong value in full-time social work faculty positions. Social work education increasingly emphasizes practice competencies and behaviors–which practitioners can model and mentor in particular ways. These pracademics bridge practice and academia in ways that uniquely sustain the profession's viability.

Transitioning to Pracademic

This article grew out of my personal experience. I worked for over 25 years in private, non-profit child welfare organizations. My roles included direct care and clinical work, program directing and administration. In my last child welfare position, I administered multiple programs with a combined staff of over 100 and a program budget of over $3 million. I have extensive social work practice experience. I am skilled in understanding and navigating the array of roles social workers must perform in a social service

setting.

After extensive time as a child welfare administrator, I decided to pursue my doctoral degree. This decision had three primary influences: First, my life partner is a social work faculty member at a local university. Thus, as the spouse of a faculty member, I was able to pursue my doctoral degree tuition–free. While I still needed to "do the work," pursuing my degree without the added financial burden faced by many doctoral students was a particular benefit.

Secondly, I pursued the doctorate as a personal, academic challenge. I was the only one in my family with a college degree. In many ways, I had already surpassed the academic expectations of my family of origin. However, I wanted to see if I could perform at the highest academic level, including writing a dissertation. Further, much of my doctoral readings and course work benefited me in my administrative role, as I continued working full-time in a social work setting. Additionally, I wanted to place myself in a position to provide leadership and organizational consultation services in semi-retirement; having a doctoral degree would aid that career pursuit.

Finally, and most importantly, I was looking for a new professional challenge. My work was meaningful and I was having a positive impact on the lives of children and families. I particularly enjoyed mentoring new employees. However, I felt the need to branch into a different area of social work. Through my life partner, I was familiar with the social work academic setting. I attended several academic conferences and I taught several courses as a part-time, adjunct instructor. Further, many of our friends and professional colleagues were in academia. Thus, I had an "insider perspective" on the academic and university setting. In many ways, for me, moving from a social work practice setting to an academic setting felt like a natural career progression and mirrored Fox's (2013) assertion that "social work teaching is one form of social work practice" (p. 6).

After completing my doctorate and consulting family, friends and colleagues, I decided to pursue a full-time social work faculty position. While I felt prepared and ready to take on this new challenge, I was not prepared for how difficult it would be to secure a full-time teaching position. I cast a wide net as I looked at faculty position announcements and networked.

Being in a two-career relationship placed limits on how far geographically I wanted to pursue a position. However, my partner and I were open to relocating, if both of us could find acceptable positions. Further, my difficulty in securing a full-time faculty position was compounded by my search occurring in 2008-2009, during the economic recession.

After several phone interviews and campus visits, I accepted a one-year visiting assistant professor position at a small private university approximately 300 miles away. I commuted weekly to this position and, as much as possible, immersed myself in faculty and campus life. Like most new faculty members, all of my courses called for extensive preparation while also continuing my research and scholarship. And, while both a personal and professional challenge, the experience confirmed my decision to make the transition to full-time teaching.

After that one year appointment, I secured my current tenure-track faculty position at a university within a one-hour commute. The position is at one of the three branch campuses of a midsize state university. In addition to carrying a full-time teaching load, I am essentially a site director for the social work program at the branch campus location. I am the only full-time social work faculty member at this location. My current department director and faculty colleagues have encouraged and welcomed me to the department. I have been able to use my previous social work practice experience in the classroom and I have collaborated with a number of colleagues on research and scholarship projects. To a great extent, my department director and colleagues recognize and value my extensive background in social work practice. The students appreciate the real life examples I bring to my teaching and the particular mentorship I am able to provide as they progress toward a career in social work.

Observations of a Pracademic

My transition from practitioner to academic was not without its risks. Yet, initially, the risks did not seem any more so than any other career change. Moving from a full-time social work practice setting to a full-time academic setting provided some unique

challenges and rewards. Below, I discuss some observations and insights into the move to the academic setting, and into establishing myself as a full-time, contributing member of a social work department.

The Risk is Worth it

When I announced to professional colleagues my intention to transition to the academic setting, some noted that they saw me as a "good teacher." However, I was met with some skepticism and concern. This apprehension was compounded by my decision to take a one-year, visiting professor position with a 300–mile weekly commute. Looking back, it was a risky decision. What if my contract was not extended beyond the one year? What if I couldn't find another teaching position? What was my backup plan should I find myself unemployed?

One evening, my partner and I shared with close friends our decision for me to take the one-year teaching position. After a brief period of silence, one friend said, with a tone of trepidation, "What are you going to do?" Our friend's question was a genuine expression of concern about my partner and me being so far apart during the week, and my long commute to another state. Later, while talking to her sister, my partner's brother-in-law asked to talk with my partner. He made sure that my partner had his mobile phone number and said, "If you need anything while Larry is out-of-town, you call me. I'll be there." These heart-felt offers of support were reassuring. It also reinforced the idea that many of our friends and family members were questioning our decision to go in this career direction.

As with most decisions in life, this decision had potential risks and rewards. Becoming a pracademic has its challenges and opportunities. My experience with the transition proved to be one of the best decisions of my career. In the following paragraphs, I reflect on what I learned and offer some suggestions from my experience, while honoring that all experiences are unique.

In pursuing that first full-time faculty position, it was important to be flexible. In my experience, hiring practices at many colleges/universities favor hiring young, newly-minted doctoral graduates. Perhaps this favoritism toward younger faculty is a

subtle form of ageism. Regardless, many universities may not want to "take a chance" on someone who is outside the normal paradigm of a fresh doctoral candidate. As I experienced, one may need to take a position that is less than ideal.

Networking is key. Identify one or more colleges/universities of interest and develop a relationship with the department chair and faculty. As I share with my students, most social workers obtain their positions through networking and personal connections, not job advertisements. The same is true for academic positions.

When I was applying and interviewing for faculty positions, I was surprised that my extensive practice experience seemed to hold so little weight. Search committees seemed to only consider academic criteria (e.g., scholarship). As a recent doctoral degreed professional, my curriculum vitae seemed to be viewed the same as other applicants with very little practice experience. I thought, and still believe, applicants for faculty positions with extensive social work practice experience should be given greater, or at least equal consideration, compared to other applicants. I advocate that search committees for social work faculty positions provide greater balance. They should acknowledge the different, yet equally important, perspective and resources that pracademics bring to social work education and the faculty role.

Finally, don't be intimidated by the academic setting. As I'll discuss in the following section, my experience was that academic culture is different than the work culture in most social work settings. Having a strong, accessible mentor can ease this adjustment. Adjusting to the academic setting is similar to adjusting to any new work setting. One must learn the history of the organization, familiarize oneself with the written (and *unwritten*) rules, and build relationships with colleagues and stakeholders.

Academic Culture

Although I had observed my partner's experience in academia, I was not quite prepared for the unique characteristics of academia. Here is an incident that encapsulates the nature of academia: After the first faculty meeting for my current position, I saw how we could improve the screening and acceptance process for applicants to the social work program. This suggestion

stemmed from my extensive experience in hiring, supervising and retaining many, many employees. I mentioned my idea to the program director; she suggested I bring it up at the next faculty meeting. At one point in the next meeting, I leaned over and asked the program director about bringing up my idea and suggestion. The program director indicated that we needed to conclude our discussion on the current issue. I thought we had already concluded the discussion! I was accustomed to meetings that involved making decisions and enacting those decisions. I failed to recognize the culture of extensive processing that I have since learned is an integral part of academia.

Finally, after 20 minutes of additional discussion on the previous issue, the program director asked me to share my idea. I outlined my thoughts on how we could change the application procedure, thus streamlining the review process and reducing faculty time in admissions meetings. Two senior faculty members immediately stated they did not like the idea and wanted to keep the process the same. Notably, five years later, I brought up the identical idea in a faculty meeting. The idea was enthusiastically accepted and implemented with little discussion or debate.

As stated earlier, in my experience, academic culture is different in many ways than most practice settings. Faculty have a reputation of excessively processing issues and concerns. Further, a "pecking order" must be respected. According to the *unwritten* rules of academic culture, I, a junior faculty member, had no business making such a grand and sweeping change to the admissions process.

Additionally, academia gives inordinate attention to the promotion and tenure process. It seems, at times, little else matters. Thus, faculty are focused on their research and pursuing publications. At the end of each semester, faculty anxiously await the release of their course teaching evaluations. The results of these course evaluations often have a strong influence on whether to recommend a faculty member for promotion and tenure.

As a result, a culture of individualism and insecurity permeate academia. Faculty are often pursuing their individual interests and activities, all in pursuit of tenure. This individualistic focus can be an

adjustment for pracademics who, in practice settings, are often accustomed to working in teams.

However, one can pursue tenure with a more corporate orientation. During my first semester, I was assigned a faculty mentor from a different department. At our first meeting, he brought up the issue of promotion and tenure (Did I mention the inordinate focus on tenure!?). To my surprise, he stated, "You do not have to get tenure alone." He went on to suggest forming one or more writing teams and to always be working on multiple research projects. I found this advice and approach particularly helpful.

Fortunately, my life partner and I collaborate professionally very well; likewise, I have other writing teams that I have found to be helpful. To all new faculty, but especially pracademics, I recommend finding colleagues with whom you have similar research interests. Develop some research projects and submit multiple manuscripts from the research for publication, even rotating first authorship on the manuscripts.

Finally, many faculty are anxious about the promotion and tenure portfolio. As a pracademic, I pursued the portfolio in a manner similar to writing a grant proposal or utilization report. I actually found the process enjoyable, because it utilized many of the skills I honed during my social work practice career. Writing my tenure portfolio gave me an opportunity to highlight my accomplishments–similar to process and program evaluations I had done for grants and other agency performance reviews. I utilized bar graphs, spreadsheets, and data reports–in a manner similar to my role as a program administrator. I gained particular satisfaction from accentuating my accomplishments as a pracademic. In this small way, I hoped to contribute to paving the way for future pracademics. My department head provided my portfolio to other faculty as an exemplar, commenting that my portfolio was exceptional in its organization and clarity.

The Pracademic Journey Continues

It has been six years since I made the move to academia. I'm well established in my role and am a fully contributing faculty member. I have the respect and support of administration, faculty, and students. As I reflect on my current status, I ponder the question "What exactly do I do as a social work educator?" The

traditional response to this question would be: I have a triple-faceted role that includes teaching and advising; pursuing a research/scholarship agenda that contributes to the social work body of knowledge; and contributing university and community service.

While the previous response is an accurate summary of the faculty role, I think it is limiting. Instead, I see my role as helping people make their dreams come true. Thus, I help students pursue their dreams of obtaining a college degree and becoming a social worker. By contributing to the social work body of knowledge through research/scholarship, I create conditions that help individuals, families, and groups pursue their dreams of reaching their highest level of functioning and well-being.

This orientation toward dream-making flows from my identity as a pracademic. As a social worker in child welfare practice, I focused on creating conditions that enhanced and empowered clients in reaching their highest level of functioning and well-being. As a social work administrator, I provided support, resources, and encouragement to the staff with whom I worked as they met clients' needs. Now, as an academic, that same focus is transferred to students, the community and the social work profession.

As reflected through formal and informal feedback, I see that I am having a positive impact on the professional development of social work students. In my teaching experience, students perceive my practice expertise as "real" social work education; students comment that they appreciate the practical examples and experience I bring to the classroom. I make connections between practice, research and theory in ways that students experience as grounded in the "nitty-gritty" of social work. Faculty members with substantive practice experience should be recognized by the academy for the particular knowledge and skills they bring to the educational experience.

Likewise, I have found my previous staff supervision experience to be particularly valuable in academic advising and dealing with students concerns. Many of the same skills I used in supporting and mentoring staff members were transferrable to working with students in the academic setting. On several occasions, when dealing with a student concern, other faculty members seemed particularly stressed by the situation and were, in my opinion, overreacting to the concern. I was able to skillfully address the concern with the student in a calm and proactive manner that was aided by my previous extensive experience in staff supervision. This example is one of many ways pracademics can bring particular value to the academic setting.

I find the academic role to be extremely rewarding. I have a positive influence on others through teaching and advising students. Further, I pursue research that both interests me and taps into my knowledge base and expertise. After years in the social work field, it is exciting to see in a more vivid way the connection between theory, best practice, and the concrete application in the field. As an established pracademic, I hope to further develop relationships with community partners that bring this integration of the theoretical with the practical to the community setting.

Looking back, I wish my practice had been more integrated and better grounded in current social work theory, knowledge and best practices. Although I had excellent faculty in my educational preparation, I recognize now the particular value of having faculty who bring extensive agency and community experience. When I say to students they need to develop a certain skill, understand a particular theory, or grasp the importance of policies, they know I have 25 plus years as an administrator. They know that I am the "real deal." I hired, supervised and terminated people just like them. I planned, implemented, and evaluated programs like those where they work. Uniquely, I translate the "book stuff" to the day-to-day practice. My leadership in the agency sector transfers into the classroom context.

As a pracademic with administrative experience, potential leadership opportunities in academia are a possibility. I am fortunate to have strong administrative support (i.e., BSW director and department head) who consistently acknowledge how my practice experience enhance my faculty role. I was even nominated by my department head (and I was selected) for a faculty-as-leaders training program, which identifies and supports faculty for possibly moving into academic leadership roles. However, I have learned that, according to academic culture, appointment to academic leadership positions typically requires tenure.

Have I mentioned the academic fixation on tenure?

Conclusion

My story as a pracademic mirrors other pracademics' experiences. When I present on this topic at professional conferences (Owens & May, 2011) or even use the term informally in conversations with colleagues who have moved into academia after extensive agency or community experience, people respond strongly. They are relieved to know a term to describe their experience. They eagerly share their stories, which have echoing themes.

The pracademic's challenge of incorporating into the academy is outweighed by the contributions they make to social work education. Like other fields (Coyne, 2007), "career switchers" bring particular expertise and real-life perspectives that inform their teaching and enrich the learning experience for students. Nothing substitutes for the pracademics' understanding of the detailed operation of social work practice settings, which is knowledge they gained from years of social work practice experience.

Pracademics bring substantive experience and expertise to the faculty role. Recruiting, supporting, and sustaining second career social work faculty contributes to "developing an educational environment that promotes, emulates, and teaches students the knowledge, values, and skills expected of professional social workers" (CSWE, 2015, p. 15). As a practice profession, social work education must engage pracademics. The recruitment and selection of pracademics for full-time faculty positions not only addresses the shortage of qualified applicants for faculty position (Anastras & Kuerbis, 2009; Mackie, 2013; Zastrow & Bremner, 2004), but achieves greater balance and expertise within the academic department.

For the pracademic, the risk is worth the reward. From my experience, my current role as social work educator has been one of the most rewarding periods of my professional career. I am able to leverage my extensive experience in the field to mentor future practitioners and mold the knowledge base of the profession. As more of us enter the academy, we will pave the way for other pracademics. Our

presence in the academy provides unique value to the faculty constellation and the academic culture.

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