

Speak of the Devil and (S)he Appears: The Role of Academic Administrators During Graduate School and Beyond

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Introduction

Although “the administration” on any college or university campus often has the reputation among faculty as a necessary evil that is far more evil than necessary, academic administrators serve in a variety of capacities and play a variety of roles on college and university campuses. Graduate students, job candidates, and new faculty members encounter administrators in a variety of spaces, and the dizzying array of titles and job descriptions can make it difficult to know exactly who does what. Adding complexity, the on-campus academic administration is itself subject to the whims of Boards of Trustees or other governing bodies, who may have very different ideas about how the college or university should be run than do the faculty.

In this chapter, I cover the basics of who’s who in academic administration, discuss the need for administrators and the various pathways that administrators may take to their roles (which can affect how they view their work and how those they supervise view them), explain some of reasons for tension between faculty and administrators, and offer suggestions about how to engage with university administrators as a graduate student, as a job candidate, and once you have accepted an academic position.

Figure 1: Who’s Who? A Summary of Key Administrative Titles and Positions

Board of Trustees/Regents/Visitors. The multi-member governing body for a single campus or for an entire statewide system of higher education (e.g., Board of Regents for Higher Education).

Chancellor/President. Either term may refer to the chief executive officer on a single campus or refer to the singular leader of a multi-campus system in which each campus has its own president.

Dean. Within a university system, deans are the heads of the colleges and schools that make up the university (e.g., the College of Arts and Sciences, School of Performing Arts). On smaller campuses that may have only one college (e.g., many liberal arts colleges) there may be a Dean of the College or Dean of Academic Affairs that serves as the chief academic officer or that serves as the Associate or Assistant Provost.

Department chair. The administrator with responsibility for a single academic department on campus. Typically reports to a Dean or Associate Dean. This is the administrator that graduate students are most likely to encounter and interact with regularly.

Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs. An institution’s chief academic officer, who is often considered to be the first among equals among the campus’ vice presidents and who may stand in for the college or university president when the president is unavailable.

Who Are Administrators (and why do we need them anyway?)

Administrators have supervisory authority over a college or university unit – a college, a department, or an office. They set policies; they supervise staff (and, in the case of academic administrators, may supervise faculty members); they manage the unit’s budget and may have fundraising responsibilities; they hire, train, supervise, and fire direct reports; they mediate conflicts between and among the constituents for their area; they must attend to the reporting requirements of their institution’s governing board as well as requirements imposed by state and federal regulators and accreditors. Every campus has administrators with responsibility for enrolling students, providing a robust academic program, ensuring that students have a variety of services and supports outside the classroom, fundraising and institutional advancement, budgeting and finance, responding to state and federal reporting requirements, and athletics—and that only scratches the surface of what administrators are called upon to do.

In early universities, administrators were few and often included only a president appointed by a governing board (Gerber 2014). Gerber (2014) documents the professionalization of the faculty during the early-to-mid-twentieth century, and reports that as faculty members professionalized and the professoriate became an established career path, faculty members began to take on both instructional and administrative roles at universities and colleges. However, by the end of the twentieth century, concern about the usurpation of faculty authority by administrators became a common complaint among faculty members. For at least the last 30 years, university faculty members have been harshly critical of “administrative bloat,” identifying increased expenditures on administrators as largely responsible for the proliferation of paperwork, reporting requirements, and bureaucracy that reduce faculty members’ time for teaching and intellectual activity (Bergmann 1991). One need only look to Twitter’s @ass_deans account to get a sense of the esteem in which administrators and administration as a concept are held by many faculty members these days.

There’s certainly truth to the claims about the proliferation of administrators on college and university campuses. A quick glance at the University of Michigan’s institutional organization chart, for example, reveals 82 separate administrative divisions, each with its own organizational chart.¹ And Michigan is no different from any other doctoral/research university. Ginsburg (2011) documents the growth of both administrative and staff ranks in higher education, noting that whereas the average faculty-to-student ratio has largely stayed flat over the last quarter century, the administrator-to-student ratio and staff-member-to-student ratio has fallen, indicating that greater numbers of administrators and staff members have been hired to do things like provide counseling services, student activities, and residential living support—all while faculty class sizes have burgeoned (Bergmann 1991) and tenure lines have been eliminated (Ginsburg 2011). However, even if they wanted to significantly reduce the number of administrators on their campuses, most institutions could not eliminate them for a whole host of practical and regulatory reasons. Indeed, institutions have been under pressure from the federal government to increase certain activities—and their reporting around them—in order to maintain their eligibility for federal financial aid (Smole 2009), and these mandates have sometimes necessitated additional administrator and staff hires. Changes in technology have also driven changes in the administrative and staff workforce on college and university campuses, with more informational and instructional technologists needed to provide support to faculty and students.

¹ See: <https://spg.umich.edu/org-charts/organizational-structure>.

Finally, on some campuses, administrative growth reflects a reluctance among faculty to take on the increasingly tedious and complex work of administering the institution, shifting more authority to the administration and contributing to the growth in administrative hires. As the American Association for University Professors acknowledged in a 1994 statement: “Faculty members must be willing to participate in the decision making processes over which a sound governance system gives them authority. . . . If they do not, authority will drift away from them, since someone must exercise it, and if members of the faculty do not, others will” (AAUP 1994). Indeed, as Lewis and Altbach (1995) reported regarding the Carnegie International Survey of the Academic Profession, “very few faculty express an interest in taking on more administrative responsibilities. They see such chores as interfering with their teaching and professional commitments. They vociferously complain about not being involved, but consistently reject opportunities to have greater influence on campus affairs.”

Pathways to Administration

An institution’s size and type will influence its organizational chart and the pathways into administration. Earlier, I used the University of Michigan’s vast organizational chart to illustrate how large the administration might be at a flagship state university. Not surprisingly, a smaller, regional public institution like Kent State University in Ohio has a much smaller—though still fairly large—administrative footprint.² Hampden-Sydney College in Farmville, Virginia, which enrolls under 1,000 students has a considerably leaner organizational chart.³ Institution size may also affect the ways in which an administrator enters the administration. At small, private liberal arts colleges, even senior administrators, particularly but not exclusively in academic affairs, may be hired out of the institution’s own faculty; those faculty members often expect to return to the faculty after serving some number of years in the administration. As a result, they are incentivized to strive for good relations with their faculty colleagues.

On the other hand, many administrative positions at larger institutions are subject to a traditional hiring process that may involve search firms with special training in hiring for academic institutions. Candidates who are identified through these kinds of processes may have prior experience as a faculty member, but equally likely, they may have come up in their career through other pathways. For example, as tenure-track faculty positions have become more scarce over the last several decades, Ph.D. holders in many fields turned to administrative work on university campuses as an alternative (Golde 2019). Other administrators come to college and university administrative work having completed an advanced degree in the academic field of higher education administration. They may not have a substantive background in another academic field and instead have been educated for the purpose of becoming administrators. Although faculty members tend to be broadly critical of administrators, particular vitriol is often directed at these professional administrators.

The pathway into administration almost certainly influences an administrator’s view of their work and the work of the faculty at an institution. Professional administrators who lack any specific tie to an institution before being hired to serve in an administrative role will have a

² See: <https://www.kent.edu/president/organizational-charts>.

³ See: <https://www.hsc.edu/human-resources/organizational-charts>.

greater challenge earning the trust of faculty members than will an administrator who is elevated into an administrative role from among their colleagues. At the same time, however, administrators who enter the institution from outside and with specific training in higher education administration may be able to see and address problems that campus insiders have simply accepted as the status quo. In short, administrators' career pathways have important influences on the ways in which they work with students and faculty members.

Encountering Administrators

Graduate students may have limited opportunities to engage with university administrators, other than with the chair of their department and the administrators who oversee the university's graduate college who are directly involved in helping the student make progress toward degree. Students may interact frequently with their department chair, especially. The chair is typically a member of the faculty in the department who has been given a workload adjustment to take on administrative responsibilities. Such responsibilities may include: developing and managing the department's annual budget; compiling teaching schedules and planning course rotations; the recruitment, mentoring, evaluation, and retention of faculty; the development and implementation of strategies to diversify the faculty and departmental offerings; fostering a climate that supports minoritized and underrepresented students and faculty members; serving as a liaison between the department's faculty and the college or university administration; and interpreting administrative decisions back to faculty members in the department.

At most institutions, when a student experiences a problem with a specific faculty member, with course availability, with the climate in the department, or with access to resources, the department chair is the person to whom the concern should first be directed. Different departments will have different norms of communication, but should it become necessary to contact the department chair about a concern, requesting a meeting through the chair's administrative assistant (if they have one) or sending an e-mail to the chair directly to request a meeting is appropriate. It is a good idea to provide basic details of the concern at the time of the meeting request so that the chair can gather any necessary information prior to the meeting.

Beyond the department chair, it would be unlikely that most graduate students would have significant need to engage with graduate school deans or the institution's leaders—such as the Provost or President—as these administrators are unlikely to be immersed in the day-to-day operation of the specific academic program in which the student is enrolled, although graduate students who find themselves with a particular problem to resolve may find that they need to elevate the issue to the college or university level. Graduate students who get involved in their department's or university's graduate student government might also encounter these administrators in the course of their work to represent their peers.

Once a student enters the academic job market, however, university administrators play an integral role in every part of the hiring process. Behind every job posting that appears on APSA's eJobs employment site⁴ there have often been painstaking negotiations between the

⁴ The American Political Science Association (APSA) eJobs website (<https://apsanet.org/eJobs>) provides a link to job postings in political science, public administration, public law, administration, and non-academic related fields. Membership in APSA is not required in order to view job listings.

department and the dean, as well as consultation with any number of other administrative units, such as with the institution's Human Resources office and chief diversity officer. At smaller institutions, the Provost, the institution's Chief Financial Officer, and even the President may also be involved in the process to authorize hiring. Everything from the timing of the search, to the content of the ad, to the number of candidates a department is permitted to bring to campus will depend on the negotiations between and among the faculty members seeking to hire a new colleague and the administrators with authority over the hiring process—with the department chair squarely in the middle.

An invitation for an on-campus interview will likely include a meeting with the dean of the college in which the department is housed; at many smaller institutions, the Provost and President may meet with job candidates or attend their job talks. Meetings with administrators during the hiring process are chances for job candidates to learn about institutional resources and opportunities that might be available to them beyond what the department can offer. Because the reappointment and tenure processes also involve deans, provosts, and presidents, meeting with these administrators as part of the on-campus interview also provides the chance for job candidates to get a sense of the vision and expectations that each of these administrators has for faculty members at the institution, and to gauge whether the candidate's vision and goals for their own work will likely be well served and supported by the institution's leadership.

If a job offer is made, it may come from the department chair or from the dean. At a smaller institution, an offer might come from the Provost. Generally speaking, any negotiation that takes place regarding salary, benefits, or startup funds will require some level of institutional approval beyond just the department chair, even if the chair is the job candidate's only point of contact during the negotiations.

Communicating with Administrators

One thing that is important to remember is that administrators are often much less accessible than are the faculty with whom graduate students are used to working. E-mails directly to administrators are often read by administrative assistants, who generally serve as gatekeepers. Graduate students who have a need to meet with an administrator should always be scrupulously professional when working with administrative assistants, as they control access to the administrators they support. (More generally, it is essential to work toward engaging with all members of the university community in a professional way while in graduate school.) As noted previously, when sending an e-mail or making an in-person request for a meeting, it is good practice to provide at least a basic overview of the reason for the meeting. For one thing, no administrator enjoys being blindsided or feeling unprepared for a meeting. More importantly, however, if the administrator can gather pertinent information prior to the meeting, a resolution to the student's concern during the meeting is more likely.

The same is true for job candidates and new faculty members. College and university administrative staff members know who the faculty members are that engage with staff members in professional ways, and who treats them as second-class members of the academic community; the former will always be given more rapid attention and fuller support.

Summary and Conclusion

Administrators serve different roles than faculty members do. They have greater levels of responsibility to institutional boards and state and federal regulators than do individual faculty members, and administrators and faculty members have different levels of authority and autonomy. There are more administrators now than there used to be, resulting from an increase in the scope of services that colleges and universities now provide, as well as from changes in technology and even from faculty members' own reluctance to do the work of running a complex institution of higher education. How these administrators are educated and how they come into their roles affects how they approach their positions.

Typically, the administrator that graduate students will encounter most frequently is their department chair. In most cases, graduate students have little need to engage with high-level university administrators; this is generally a positive thing, because it means that the student is focused on their education and not on institutional bureaucracy. But, as graduate students become Ph.D. candidates, and then job candidates, and then new faculty—or, maybe even new administrators themselves—their engagement with the institution's administration increases by necessity. Engaging with administrators and their administrative staff members in a professional manner can help to support the establishment of a positive working relationship with the administration. Being thoughtful about the institutional and regulatory imperatives that operate on institutional administrators can help to contextualize the decisions they make, even those with which the faculty disagree.

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| | Achieves objective? | Comments: |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Formatting | | |
| 2000-3000 words (w/ references) | Yes | |
| APSA Style guide | Yes | |
| Grammar & Punctuation | Yes | |
| A title that clearly communicates the topic | Yes | I love this title! |
| Style | | |
| “Encyclopedic” Style | Yes | |
| Fits to assigned section | Yes | |
| Clarity & Organization | Yes | |
| Content | | |
| Short intro to topic | Yes | |
| brief explanation of why the topic is important | Yes | |
| provides advice and/or weighs potential options for student | Yes | I wonder if a short paragraph devoted to interacting with the department chair – given, as you mention, that grad students will interact the most with chairs – would be helpful. Could cover best practices or else provide some guidance about how best to engage with the chair. |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Highlights particular concerns for minoritized populations and/or intersectional issues | Somewhat | Granted, this chapter doesn't necessarily require this discussion, since it's more of a who's who. However, I could see an expanded section on interacting with the department chair that could speak to special considerations for these identity groups. |
| <i>Additional feedback</i> | | Overall, the chapter is well done, Lauren! Concise, insightful, and definitely achieves our objectives! |