Professor or Administrator?



Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

*By Eileen Barrett and Mary Cullinan -* April 03, 2013

At some point, many faculty members ask themselves whether they want to stay the course in their department or jump to an administrative role.

As longtime friends and academics, we talked about that choice many times. We met 25 years ago as tenure-track faculty members in the English department at California State University at Hayward (now known as East Bay). Since then, Eileen has remained as professor there, although she has also served as department chair and as director of a faculty-development office. Mary took the administrative path from chair to dean to provost, and has now been president of Southern Oregon University for seven years.

We thought it might help young academics facing the faculty-or-administrator question to hear how we debated and resolved it for ourselves.

Mary: Was there a turning point when you decided to stay the course as a faculty member?

Eileen: This campus is pretty small, so opportunities for faculty to serve in administrative appointments come up regularly. When I was a newly tenured professor, just after you left Hayward, I chaired our English department for two years. It was a great way to learn how a university functions.

After I'd been in our department for 11 years, I had the opportunity to direct our faculty-development office. I collaborated with colleagues from across the campus to improve pedagogy. With the revolution in instructional technology, the late 90s were exciting. I loved providing carrots to faculty members without any concern for the stick. It was the perfect administrative job for me. But it also helped me see clearly what I had known 11 years before: Teaching had to be the center of my career.

But you clearly took another path. When did you know you weren't going to stay in the English department?

Mary: At first my jobs arrived almost by accident. I took on the department chair's job when our chair became ill. Then I served as interim dean when the dean retired. The provost sent me to a number of conferences where I learned more about higher-education issues and problem-solving at the administrative level. When I saw an ad for the dean's position at Cal State-Stanislaus, I applied enthusiastically.

There was never a moment when I said, "That's it. I'm going to be an administrator." However, I saw my administrative work had lasting value for students—and for the institution. That's been a hugely motivating aspect of my career.

Also, I loved the constant change in administrative life. I was afraid I might burn out as a faculty member over time. What keeps you charged up year after year?

Eileen: For me, students keep everything new and exciting. The student mix and the individual students are so different every year, every term.

And their stories are so compelling. A while back, I worked with a student on her graduate-school applications. At age 11, Mariela left her village in Guatemala, walked to the U.S. border in San Diego, climbed the 20-foot wall, and reunited with her mother in Hayward. She survived a violent neighborhood, overcame a learning disability, and earned her B.A. from our campus. Today she wants to earn her graduate degree so that she can help others. And we have hundreds of students with amazing stories. Don't you miss those regular student connections?

Mary: Of course, I miss getting to know students the way I did as a faculty member. Now it's a treat when I get to work with students one on one or in small groups.

I don't always get to hear their stories from the students themselves. But I still learn wonderful stories. It's easy to come to work every day knowing how the university is transforming students' lives, and their families' lives. Now, as president, I can help guide the institution as a whole. At my university now, for example, we'll open an honors college in the fall. That is a huge initiative. I'm inspired to be working with campus and community members on it—and raising significant scholarship dollars for students.

Eileen: But you loved teaching. You must miss the life of a faculty member!

Mary: I miss the rhythms of faculty life. I miss preparing for classes, thinking about how I can help students learn and be successful in my classes.

I also miss the relationships I had with faculty colleagues. Once you're an administrator, those relationships change. Faculty members joke about going to the "dark side"—but they still say it. You've stepped over a line.

Eileen: And you can't have much of a private life as a president.

Mary: True. I'm highly visible. I'm in the news. I can't go anonymously to the movies or the grocery store. I have to be careful with my sense of humor. Remarks can easily be taken the wrong way.

For me, a more significant downside is that, as an administrator, I have to face difficult and sometimes heart-rending decisions. As a faculty member, I fretted over giving a student a failing grade. Now my decisions may affect people's entire lives. It's a huge responsibility.

But I still feel my decision to become an administrator was the right one for me. I'm happier living with the surprises and challenges of administration, especially as a university president. Every day is different. And I know I'm making a difference by helping the university thrive in difficult times.

Was there ever a point when you might have taken a different path?

Eileen: Being at a comprehensive state university like this one means I focus on teaching more than research. During my first years at East Bay, I had opportunities to go elsewhere—to a private liberal-arts college or to a research institution. In those situations, I would've had the time and resources to publish more, to be more scholarly.

But I definitely wanted a teaching-focused university. I also wanted an institution like this one that is supportive of gay and lesbian faculty. I value the diversity of the Bay Area, and I appreciate how tenure has given me the academic freedom to speak my mind and push administration to do the right thing. We've had some success through our Diversity Council in raising key issues about student diversity, and our Feminist Faculty Union shares scholarship, works on hiring issues, and organizes social events for new faculty members.

Mary: Do you have advice for faculty members who are considering an administrative role?

Eileen: Learn before you leap. Begin as a department chair to see if the rewards outweigh the challenges. Talk to people you admire, people who are handling their administrative positions with integrity. I've told several female colleagues to call you.

What about you? What would you do differently if you were starting out today?

Mary: As a department chair and dean, I wish I'd spent time learning and thinking about leadership. As an English major and faculty member, I thought seriously about teaching and research. But becoming chair was a shock. I was completely unprepared.

Now I think intentionally about effective leadership. How do you make change? How can you help move an institution forward?

Eileen: So what's your career advice for a faculty member thinking about administration?

Mary: Many academic administrators fell into their roles, as I did, and then learned through mistakes. If you think administration is an exciting option, prepare yourself. Talk to colleagues, as you suggested. Attend conferences.

Really think about what an administrative career entails. I've met numerous faculty members over the years who were disgruntled because their campus didn't hire them into an administrative position. An administrative career often requires moving. I've worked on four different campuses in three states. Personally, I've enjoyed those changes, but the upheavals aren't for everyone.

If an administrative role remains interesting, let people on your campus know that you'd like to explore a leadership position. Seek a temporary opportunity when it comes up, the way you did.

Spending a year or so outside your department will broaden your understanding of the university even if you decide to remain a faculty member.

Eileen: Both of us should remember how lucky we've been.

Mary: Absolutely. And we made the choices that felt right for us. That's probably the best advice we can give to others.

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