Essay calls for new model job of faculty member-administrator

Submitted by Michael J. Cripps on May 12, 2014 - 3:00am

College and university costs have outstripped national inflation rates for well over a decade. A good part of this inflation is due to state disinvestments in public higher education and the across-the-board embrace of a more Club Med-like experience at residential institutions to attract undergraduates. Colleges and universities have adopted a Taylorist vertical division of labor that favors layers of full-time associate and assistant provosts, deans, and directors instead of a bevy of faculty-administrators with one foot firmly planted in the classroom. Higher education needs to rethink this leadership model.

How big is this issue? The American Institutes for Research, drawing on National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, documents a two-decade trend that should give anyone pause:

*Public nonresearch institutions in 1990 averaged roughly twice as many full-time faculty as administrators — more than 20 years later, the two were almost equal. By 2012, the pendulum had swung at private nonprofit colleges and public research universities, which averaged less than one full-time faculty member (.75 to .90) for every administrator.*

Across the entire higher education landscape, there are only about 2.5 faculty for each professional and managerial administrator, and at private nonprofits and public research-intensives, there are actually more administrators than faculty members!

This shift toward administrators contributes measurably to the cost of higher education, all with scant evidence that it has improved the quality of either instruction or student learning. If first-year retention is any indication of the ratings “education consumers” give to the experience, colleges and universities are in real trouble: The nation’s first-to-second year retention in 2010 was just 77 percent (NCES). This growth in the managerial-administrative class is not working as higher education’s quality control or efficiency mechanism, two things Frederick Taylor promised in *The Principles of Scientific Management* more than 100 years ago.

Colleges and universities require some full-time administrators, to be sure. But they would do well to recognize that the faculty-administrator, an endangered species on campus, is uniquely situated to deliver the outcomes at the core of the higher education mission — at a fraction of the cost of a member of the administrative managerial class. Faculty and administrators alike have given up this important leadership ground between the pure faculty role and the managerial-administrative role of deans and provosts.

Tenure-track faculty know the three-legged stool of scholarship, teaching, and service. The rank ordering of those three legs varies by institutional type, with research universities privileging scholarship and community colleges emphasizing teaching. Often lost in this mix is “service,” a highly elastic category of academic labor commonly reduced to such activities as membership on a committee or two, attendance at a majors fair, and participation in reviewing placement tests.

Ask a faculty member to head up a major new initiative, call it “service,” and the university gets a new initiative developed without any added overhead — provided all goes well. The faculty member spearheads the new initiative, sits on a couple other committees, maintains a regular teaching load, and
pursues a research agenda. With the new responsibility thrown in as “service” on top of existing work, however, nobody should be surprised when things don’t add up. Overloaded a bit, the faculty member may underperform in developing that new initiative, slide a bit in the area of teaching, or scale back on research productivity. The provost or dean concludes the faculty member cannot do that kind of work — he is not capable of leading, is too focused on research or teaching, or simply doesn’t care — and hires an associate-level provost or assistant dean to take on the kinds of work represented by this new initiative. It’s no surprise that many faculty are wary of these “service” roles.

Putting aside hypothetical scenarios, one might explore a classic function at colleges and universities: admissions. Not long ago, faculty played a key role in the admissions process, both guided by and guiding a dean. Faculty would help to shape the standards, vet applicants, and determine the academic profiles of the entering class. Today, full-time administrators staff admissions offices and faculty engagement in the admissions process is uncommon. Faculty may complain about who is and is not admitted, but they do so from the sidelines. It matters little whether faculty have retreated from these roles or been nudged aside to make room for managerial administrators.

It is precisely the elasticity in “service” that leads universities to miss both the efficiency and the potential effectiveness of the faculty-administrator. Enter any bar and you’ll notice right away that the stools have four legs, not three. A three-legged stool is fine when one wants to sit while squatting; it is an accident waiting to happen once it’s more than about 20 inches high. And our hypothetical faculty member’s new initiative involves a higher level of responsibility than membership on the college’s alumni scholarship committee. The university doesn’t need a new associate or assistant dean to handle these kinds of challenges. It needs a faculty workload stool with a fourth leg called “administration.”

We can quickly locate at least two places where faculty already have a fourth leg on their stools: the chair of an academic department and the campus writing program administrator. Both are excellent examples of the faculty-administrator, particularly when done well. The chair and the writing administrator are almost always faculty, which means they are in the classroom each term, serve on assorted committees across campus, and maintain a program of scholarly inquiry. This close connection to the pedagogical labor of the university means they do not forget how difficult, time consuming, and rewarding it is to teach well. And they value the careful analysis and measured claims that advance scholarship. When they bring this mindset to their administrative work, great things happen.

What distinguishes the chair and writing administrator from our faculty member leading that hypothetical new initiative? The chair and writing administrator have reassigned time from teaching for their work, something that is too often dismissed as “course release.” This time signals the importance of the work by providing them with room to do it. Faculty-administrators teach one or two fewer courses per term than their colleagues, have a clear set of responsibilities for administration, and are held accountable for performance. This model is scalable and entirely applicable in many of the important leadership activities currently lumped in as “service” or handed off to some associate or assistant dean or administrative director.

This is a financial no-brainer. Universities have hired armies of administrators over the last two decades, while faculty hires (and salaries) have remained mostly flat. Replacing full-time faculty with adjuncts does little to advance a university’s core mission. An economically rational approach more consistent with the higher education mission would suggest that hiring more full-time faculty to cover those classes from which our faculty-administrators have been reassigned would yield a better return on investment than adding more associate deans or directors. Full-time faculty cost more than adjuncts, but they also contribute much more to the university. After all, an adjunct’s stool has only one leg — teaching.

If the managerial administrator model is not more cost-effective, perhaps it yields better outcomes for the university. Specialization can build expertise, better analysis and more subtle judgments in specific knowledge domains, and performance efficiencies. There are definitely administrative roles for which faculty are not qualified. Psychological counseling services, for example, are likely best left to trained counselors at most universities. Between the dean and the director of health services, however, there are dozens of roles in academic affairs, advising, admissions, and student life that faculty-administrators could legitimately fill on reassigned time. Might the faculty-administrator approach yield comparable (or
better) outcomes than the managerial administrators who teach no classes and engage in no scholarship? The answer is a matter of priorities, professional development, and evidence.

Colleges and universities miss important opportunities to capitalize on institutional memory and dense campus networks when they locate essential skills and responsibilities in just a few individuals whose ties to the institution are relatively thin. Many deans don’t last more than about three years. By privileging and expanding managerial administrator hires, we miss the opportunity to distribute academic leadership skills across highly educated, deeply analytical employees with robust institutional ties and a finger on the pulse of university life. Leadership skills are transferrable, making investments in faculty-administrators contributions to the quality of faculty service across the entire institution.

Faculty-administrators are close to the ground on educational initiatives and have campus networks they draw on to advance initiatives by recruiting colleagues and building support. Deans also have networks, but their networks are more often within the administrative ranks. They tend to be less closely tied to the faculty, making multiple, interlocking network-based management difficult. As a result, they can easily find themselves managing by directive, with initiatives lurching forward in fits and starts as faculty respond, react, or resist.

And the evidence that managerial-administrators make better decisions than faculty-administrators is anecdotal at best. One can easily cherry-pick exceptionally smart decisions made by deans, just as one can readily locate real duds. And the same is true for faculty-administrators.

Several years ago, I was a faculty writing program administrator working in the City University of New York system. At that time, Alexandra W. Logue, executive vice-chancellor and university provost, published an opinion article in Inside Higher Ed entitled “The Scholarship of Administration.” [1] Writing to the managerial-administrative class and borrowing an insight from Ernest Boyer’s Scholarship Reconsidered (Carnegie Foundation, 1990), Logue called for the best, most scholarly, systematic approach to administrative initiatives:

Turning the scholarly lens on administration and using the same careful investigation, design, assessment, and communication strategies employed in traditional research, colleges and universities can more effectively ensure that their efforts result in the greatest positive effect. Too often, and in direct contrast with how they would conduct their own research, some administrators embark on academic initiatives without first investigating what others have done, without designing their initiatives so that they can assess the results, and without broadly communicating those results.

I read Logue’s call as a breath of fresh air, and I’m certain that other faculty wish administrators consistently brought such an approach to their work. Although she completely ignores the possibility that faculty-administrators might have a role to play in the scholarship of administration, I take Logue’s point as a clear indication that faculty-administrators are entirely capable of excelling at campus administrative responsibilities.

Expanding this model of the faculty-administrator will require both faculty and administrators to adjust their role definitions. Those of us in the faculty ranks need to shift our thinking about “service.” We are forever squeezing important campus leadership roles into a box called service and devaluing the meaningful work faculty in those roles perform. A chair’s role is not service; it is an administrative leadership responsibility. Reassigned time from teaching, stipends, and other workload or compensation offsets signal that the work is more than simply service. At many colleges, unfortunately, performance evaluations and promotional criteria still consider this kind of work as “service,” a situation that confirms just how elastic (and problematic) the category has become. Recognizing “administration” as distinct from mere service is a first step toward accepting that some faculty work from a four-legged stool.

Both faculty and administrators in colleges and universities also need to recognize the faculty-administrator role as a reallocation of the workload – from three legs to four. Both administrators and faculty must accept that the fourth leg is not simply tacked onto the three-legged stool. Some reassigned time from teaching (or some scholarship expectations, depending on the context) redistributes the faculty-administrators’ responsibilities and workload, reducing the teaching (or scholarship) obligation somewhat
to create space for the administrative obligation. Expanding the faculty-administrator model will require recalibrating the load on each leg of the stool, something that is neither radical nor particularly difficult.

The real challenge may be found in the ranks of the managerial-administrator class. I am not particularly interested in lamenting the corporatization of the university and the decline of faculty autonomy — at least not here. But something is amiss when whole classes of universities have more administrators than faculty. Benjamin Ginsburg’s *The Fall of the Faculty* (Oxford University Press, 2011) is an evidence-based broadside that charts the rise of what he calls “deanlets,” “deanlings,” and an “administrative blight” within higher education. For Ginsburg, this explosion in the managerial-administrative class is part adaptation of a corporate ideology to higher education and part Bureaucracy 101: Deans need associates and associates need assistants. This may not be the iron cage as Max Weber imagined it, but it may still be a cage.

How might universities break free? I recommend an incremental pragmatism that slowly cultivates and expands the faculty-administrator role. We have a new idea for curriculum or a student affairs-related initiative. Do we put an associate dean or a member of the faculty in charge? Give a faculty-administrator the reins, provide adequate reassigned time for the work and leadership, identify performance targets, and treat the responsibility as something much more meaningful than most of what counts as service.

As we make a series of these decisions, we will figure out how best to structure the incentives, the support, and the accountability. We will also find out which projects are just “service” and which ones involve “administration.” And we may slowly, steadily complicate that vertical division of labor, reinvigorate the role of faculty in decision making, slow the out-of-control growth of the managerial-administrative class, and make marginal improvements in the rate of inflation for college tuition.

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