

Changing Your Life: Reflections on the Road Less Traveled

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"It is always best, if possible, to move when one is still wanted" (Art Sandeen, as cited in Blimling, 2002, p. 34).

The career arc for many in student affairs involves an uncertain journey. Finding balance between the professional and personal life can be challenging. For some, changing careers in mid-stream, an emerging trend in some facets of the American working landscape, offers possibilities. For others, retiring after a full career and working part-time in another is becoming a financial necessity; however, combining the two, changing career directions after a full professional life without retiring, is different.

This article reflects the experience of one, the author, a senior career student affairs administrator turned faculty member, and explores his own professional journey - the accidents, coincidences and choices that merged into this journey of career change. It is the story of a road less traveled but one certainly worth consideration in the long arc of professional life.

Graduate School and First Position

When I entered undergraduate school, I had grand visions of becoming an attorney and therefore majored in history. Why? My adviser suggested that a history degree was a good preparation for law school. Besides, I naively told myself, I am good at history because after all, it is only reading books and memorizing dates. Four years later, in the law-school admission glut of Richard Nixon's Watergate Waterloo, following a lack-luster attempt at the law-school entrance exams, and only having applied to the three most prestigious law schools in my region, I discovered I was not going to law school after all. For me, as for many of my peers, the choice was simple: get a job or go to graduate school. With the Vietnam War still raging, graduate school looked particularly appealing, so off I went to graduate school, still majoring in history. What was I planning? I was planning very little.

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Somewhere between the many student activities of undergraduate life and a fortuitous graduate assistantship in the office of student activities, I began to think it might be nice to be paid for being involved in campus life full-time. Happily, my graduate supervisor agreed and offered me an entry-level position in student affairs. From that point, I seldom looked back, eventually committing to a career in higher education and obtaining my doctoral degree in the administration of higher education. Like many colleagues in student affairs work (Blimling, 2002), I “drifted” into work as a student development professional.

My Career and a New Opportunity

For more than 28 years I worked my way up in the administrative hierarchy of student affairs. Eventually, I began to teach as an adjunct faculty member. I learned that I liked administrative work, but as I grew older, I found that I loved reading, preparing for presentations at professional associations, and, most of all, teaching in the formal classroom. I began constructing a plan in which I would take a well-deserved state retirement at a relatively young age and go teach full-time in a small private college.

Ironically, when I had reached the exactly perfect balance of compensation and responsibility in the administrative organization, an unusual opportunity presented itself. This opportunity was an offer to teach a single course at another state institution I had often admired. The institution was only two hours away and the program was one I felt was doing good things.

After the necessary consultation with boss and family, I took annual leave on a weekly basis and each Thursday drove to my part-time assignment in the mountains of North Carolina. Unfortunately for my career as an administrator, I found I enjoyed the drive, the students, the institution and the environment more than anything I had experienced in a long time. When a full-time, tenure-track position became available the following year, I applied and was offered the position. An understanding spouse and an already vested retirement plan led me to feel I could afford to “start all over again” at the age of 51 as a tenure-track faculty member. I took a substantial pay cut, accepted the position and became what I subsequently described as “the world’s oldest living assistant professor.”

Several considerations dictated my decision to change my life. I was “relatively” young and had decided that becoming a chief student affairs officer was not among my ambitions. In my current administrative work, I found myself distanced from everyday student lives, and I had grown weary of 3:00 AM phone calls from police or distraught families and students. Most importantly, I felt I had learned a good bit in my 28 years of administration and found that teaching was the best way to share what I had experienced while continuing to

learn from my students. What follows are reflections on my first year in the transition from established administrator to full-time faculty member. It was a very good year!

Thoughts on the Career Transition

Between April, when the position was offered and accepted, through the spring and into the summer when I left my administrative life behind, I was in neither of two worlds. I was no longer fully invested in the future of my current administrative position and not yet enabled to fully participate in my faculty position. While this cognitive and spatial ambiguity was somewhat refreshing as in interlude, it soon became an annoyance. There was a past and a future but no present.

Suddenly many of the things that normally contribute to a sense of place were becoming amorphous. I did not have a new phone number, email address, or even an office location for my coming job. Quite appropriately, the assignment of limited physical resources at my new institution awaited the dean's decision, based on the domino effect of which faculty members were coming, staying, or going in the coming year. In my future faculty job, I did not yet exist, but in my current administrative position I was becoming a ghost. Physically, I continued to reside in the administrative world; spiritually, I was already exploring the faculty horizon. I found myself becoming an existentialist.

Meanwhile, life had to go on in my administrative work. This transition that I was participating in presented many interesting challenges. I experienced the need to explore my professional legacy. Part of who I had been as an administrator had to continue on in formal and informal tasks at my old institution, but I also needed to lay to rest part of who I had been. What was there of me that had to be replicated or incarnated in other forms? What normally would I be doing in six months that should now become the responsibility of someone else? What policy questions could I answer, should I answer, and which should I defer to my successor?

The farewell parties and the transition of responsibilities soon arrived. I left the job of administrator, and because my faculty position did not begin for several months, I entered a period of sabbatical. I wondered and worried a bit about what was to come. I found the absence of my office surroundings both liberating and problematic. I enjoyed having no daily calendar and appointments but missed the easy availability of access to technology, colleagues, and support that my former position had offered. I found myself somewhat blindly preparing for a semester of courses and students, the needs and expectations of which I could only guess.

At last, inevitably, the keys to the new office arrived, and with them the fall semester, though “fall” for a new faculty member begins in late summer with a round of meetings, introductions, and assignments that were in part expected and in some cases oddly new – a new semester in a new home. I found myself attending an orientation for new faculty, the content often consisting of things I had previously taught to new faculty in my old administrative position. I was now the newcomer and found it interesting to consider how effective I had been as an administrator in such settings. I quickly discovered a new culture of supervision, non-supervision, schedule, and life far different from my previous 28 years.

Learning the Ropes (Again)

Teaching three classes (with my one-class release for research) that first semester brought surprises. While an adjunct, I had taught only one class per semester and, even with my administrative responsibilities, had time to prepare and reflect on my once per week meeting with my students. Now I taught three classes, each meeting once a week but multiplying my responsibilities enormously. Preparation of new courses was consuming. Staying ahead of my students, finding what worked and did not, grading an endless cascade of reaction papers and other assignments, meeting with students before, after, and around classes, and keeping up with my responsibilities for a research agenda while learning “the ropes” was quite challenging.

I also found that faculty members are supervised in a manner far different from my administrative experience. My administrator’s fuzzy concepts of academic reality quickly were clarified as a new faculty member. I found that the lack of direct administrative supervision quickly led to an initial sense of ambiguity about my daily accomplishments. This, in turn, led to a small feeling that perhaps no one cared what I did. I rapidly was disabused of this notion.

My feelings of ambiguity were quickly replaced by the need to demonstrate evidence of scholarship, the requirement to create a portfolio for promotion and tenure review, a need to arrange for peer reviews of my teaching and student assessment of my courses and teaching, and a deadline to apply for subsequent appointments and the continuing tenure processes. Proof of my on-going scholarship activities was required for my department chair and for the tenure and contract review process of my departmental personnel committee. My dean wanted my small contributions for his annual report, and promotion and tenure reviews led to the need for a portfolio notebook of my achievements. I became quite practiced at presenting my accomplishments.

It became obvious that many did care about what I was accomplishing. My teaching was required to be demonstrably successful in helping students to learn. I came to understand that accountability for the *number* of hours spent in

class or office were not nearly so important as accountability for the *fulfillment* of teaching, advising, scholarship and service *expectations* of my students, chair, dean and, never to be forgotten, departmental personnel committee. Instead of worrying about supervision, my task became to “read” this new environment of caring and make sense of it in ways that were productive for my students, institution, and scholarship. The boundaries were present and real; they were simply much broader and further out than I had experienced in administration.

As I learned my responsibilities as a teacher, I found it was necessary to find a new rhythm in this academic life: classes, preparation, meeting students, grading, papers, articles, journals, emails, resources, and working with an assigned graduate student assistant that I was not sure what to do with. Every day was an adaptation and acclimatization to the new environment. In some ways, being a career administrator was good preparation for teaching. For example, administrators gain a high tolerance for meetings, committees, and the falderal that comes with them. It was therefore a pleasant surprise to discover that, as a faculty member, the few meetings that I found it necessary to attend, though still filled with some degree of falderal, were far less burdensome. Administratively assigned faculty paper work was far less than in my earlier life but a request for spring textbook selections and course preparations was followed (it seemed almost immediately) by requests for summer session preparations, which were shortly followed by requests for fall again.

About three quarters of the way through the first year, I began to notice that I was no longer the newcomer. I had become familiar to the neighborhood. Individuals stopped dropping in to introduce themselves, and it became incumbent on me to take the next step for a repeat lunch. Names and faces became more familiar and conversations in the abstract about so-and-so became associated with names and functions. It was important to note this transition for my own social and collegial well-being. There had been a change in the environment and a subsequent change in my self-image. I was becoming a faculty member.

Conclusions: The World of Possibilities

When I was an administrator, I worked each day through a schedule of meetings, events and deadlines. When my children asked one day, “Dad, what do you do?” I replied, “I meet!” Finding that explanation too accurate after 28 years, I decided to think about my next life. I was looking for something beyond the sameness of my environment at the time. I thought that full-time classroom teaching, the life I had been pursuing for 14 years as an adjunct, and differentiated from the out-of-classroom teaching I did as an administrator working with students, might offer the possibilities I was seeking. It seemed to

me that I would be happier being paid to think more broadly and openly about possibilities and ideas.

Two years into that new life, I commute two hours twice weekly to a job I find I love. I am surrounded by students who are engaging and challenging and by colleagues who share a love of teaching. I attend commencements and hood my graduates, who have become somewhat like my adopted children. I drive around the mountains in which I work and marvel at my good fortune. I am struck by the fact that I live in a world of possibilities. I am constantly challenged to make something of the written page and one-dimensional notions of the text; constantly offered the opportunity to make meaning of experiences with students; and constantly balancing between the extraordinary opportunities I am offered and the terrifying fear of failing to meet the expectations that I have helped to set. I ask myself, how did I get here? And the answer that comes to me is a simple one: I made a thoughtful choice about my life and was fortunate to have my family's joyous support. As a result of that choice and their support, I live, as I had hoped, in a world of possibilities. It is a fine place to dwell.

Reference

- Blimling, G. (2002). Reflections on career development among student affairs leaders. In J. C. Dalton, & M. McClinton. *The art and practical wisdom of student affairs leadership. New Directions for Student Services, no. 98* (p. 34). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.