

Women in Academia: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love (or at Least Embrace) Administration

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As most people who end up in administration after receiving a Ph.D. and working in academia, I didn't start out with any aspirations of doing office work, building marketing kits, or fundraising. I ended there because I wanted to change my workplace, because I didn't see anyone else stepping to the plate to make those changes happen, and because I found out, while performing some of this work, that I got satisfaction out of solving these and other administrative problems--"helping the trains run on time," as they say.

WHY GET INTO IT? SOLVING STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS

Having entered graduate school in the field of East European history in 1991 in the U.S., I lived through a period of great excitement about new avenues for research, while at the same time observing the huge difference between interest in gender analysis among colleagues in other fields, and the indifference towards gender analysis in my own backyard. I could look to no mentors in my own field, so I had to seek them outside of it. I learned quickly that I needed to be pro-active if I wanted to pursue the feminist agenda I had become passionate about—making women's lives and choices not only visible, but also central to understanding the past of Eastern Europe. Making allies was an important way to pursue this agenda, as was growing a thick skin when senior scholars in my field were at best indifferent and at worse derided what I was interested in.

While completing my first book as an assistant professor and having my first child, I also learned that family planning and childcare were not issues academic institutions in the United States took seriously. I was able to succeed in becoming both a successful author and a mother only because of a whole network of family, friends, and colleagues who lent a hand. I was grateful for that, but I wanted to see if more permanent institutional solutions to these problems could be put into place. Having learned from my years in graduate school that whining is no answer to any such structural and attitudinal problems, I decided to look into what would take to change the views and policies towards family leave. By the time I had my second child, I had volunteered on a number of committees at Indiana University, with the hope of learning the internal policies and channels, as well as figuring out who my allies could be in seeking to make these changes happen. I worked for years to push for a new family-leave policy, and in 2011 this policy finally came into being.

WHY STAY? GETTING SATISFACTION OUT OF SERVING OTHERS

Most academics working the humanities and many in the social sciences are loners—we do not pursue team-based research projects, we don't teach in teams, and we seldom co-author books and articles. So we do not acquire the habits and values of people working as a group in all aspects of their professional work, as many natural scientists do, for instance. I was trained in the same individual scholar mold. But as I became more knowledgeable about university policies and the main players, I came to enjoy working in teams, solving the sorts of solutions posed before the Bloomington Faculty Council, the Executive Committee of the History Department, or other service-focused committees I served on.

Given my growing presence in such forums, I was eventually asked to take on a more substantial position as an administrator—serving as Interim Director for the Russian and East European Institute. I was terrified by the idea that at age 38 I was coming in to serve as Director after David Ransel, many years my senior and a giant in the field of Slavic Studies, had been running the Institute for almost a decade. Would I be unable to uphold David's high standards? Would I be able to gain the respect and trust of the staff at the institute? Would faculty be as willing to work with me as they did with David? I had huge shoes to fill and, at the same time, I knew that I wasn't someone who could just sit back and do nothing more than watch the shop while the Director was on leave. It was a great learning experience, which gave me added appreciation for the importance of staff in running academic units smoothly. I also learned how to handle tension in the workplace and how to make tough decisions that had a direct impact on people's livelihoods.

DOING IS BELIEVING. GAINING AND KEEPING THE TRUST OF THOSE YOU SERVE.

The reason I continued to be interested in serving in an administrative capacity after that point was that I realized I could actually do it—something I had not imagined myself doing in the past. I could handle overseeing a staff that was diverse, even if I was younger than some of the people in that group. I was comfortable with giving direction to faculty senior to me by many years, many of them men, and I was able to persuade many of them to work with me. Not everyone was and has become a fan of my leadership style and achievements. That is another important lesson I've learned about administration. There is a proportion of faculty and to some extent staff for whom, a new voice, someone who might not look like them and especially someone younger, is not a welcome change in a leadership position. But if you learn to listen to concerns and ideas while being judicious and transparent with decision-making, most people will learn to respect and appreciate you as a leader, even if they many not agree with you on every occasion.

I take being a citizen of my community of professional choice very seriously. After growing up under a harsh totalitarian regime, there are few things I cherish as much as the ability to shape my fate and that of the community in which I live through active, engaged citizenship. Researching and writing about the past are core elements to how I believe my voice can count. Teaching is another essential part of enhancing this community. Service by working in administration is sometimes even more powerful, but more importantly it is always necessary. There is no other way to protect the academic mission of the university and higher education than to assure a professional and humane set of institutional practices. It means putting up with

drudgery and unpleasantness every day. But it also means making it possible for those who share that passion for education to do their work well, to engage in creative acts of bold thinking and acting. I am glad to have been able to help uphold best practices and shape better policies and practices in this regard. When I believe I no longer have the ability to do so, I will happily retreat into oblivion.