

## How to Survive the Jump From Faculty to Administrator

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Surviving and thriving as an administrator is not easy. The shift from faculty member to a leadership role, whether it's department chair or dean, requires self-knowledge, good communication and negotiation skills, and setting boundaries, says C. Kristina Gunsalus, special counsel in the Office of University Counsel and adjunct professor in the College of Law at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

### **SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

Gunsalus, who was responsible for department head/administrator training and support at UIUC and continues to conduct workshops on "survival skills for administrators," says the first step in this transition is to ask yourself, "Why have I taken on these administrative duties?" If your initial answer is "because it was my turn," a common, though insufficient answer, Gunsalus recommends asking yourself, "Why did you feel any obligation to take a turn?" Usually the responses are these:

- It's a chance to give something back to the department or institution.
- It's a chance to make a difference.
- Maybe I can leave the department or college better than when I found it.
- It's an opportunity to use my skills in a new realm.

Hopefully you have a clear and compelling motivation for taking on this position "because there's not enough money to pay for the kind of stress that comes with the job," Gunsalus says.

Gunsalus also recommends setting two or three goals "so that at the end of your term of service you can look back and say here are two or three ways in which I left the department better than it was or whatever correlates with your reason for taking the position."

These goals are essential "because that's the only way that you can keep making incremental progress on a regular basis because it's so easy to be swept away by the minutia, instant demands, meetings, in-boxes, telephone calls, and interruptions," Gunsalus says.

"[Articulating your goals] can change how you feel about what you're doing and give you a way to assess whether or not you are making the difference that you expected to make," Gunsalus says.

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## **COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

Dealing with difficult people, conflict, and complaints—situations that require communication and negotiation skills—give academic leaders the most trouble, Gunsalus says.

While some people are innately good at handling these issues, negotiation, listening, and communication skills can be learned.

The basis of negotiation is communication, and perhaps the most overlooked communication skill is listening. "In general, we are poor listeners, and there is a good reason for that: We can listen and absorb information at a higher rate than people speak," Gunsalus says. So often, people are thinking of other things, like the next point they want to make, instead of giving their undivided attention to the speaker.

Gunsalus uses several listening exercises in her work with academic leaders to develop listening skills. For example, one exercise requires participants to state the other person's point to that person's satisfaction before stating their own.

"My experience [with problem personnel cases and other difficult issues] was that the complainant that felt listened to and respected in the process, even if the outcome was not what they were seeking, felt that they were treated fairly and appropriately in the process and would accept the outcome," Gunsalus says.

## **'BETTER LIVING THROUGH BETTER BOUNDARIES'**

One of the mantras Gunsalus teaches is "Better living through better boundaries," meaning that you need to be able to keep confidences, understand the boundary between you and your role, and understand the limits of your authority and expertise.

Gunsalus warns against confusing personal and professional roles. Try to make it clear that you are not the person to help with personal issues that are not related to work.

Inevitably, however, as department chair or dean, you will "learn things about your colleagues you would rather not know," Gunsalus says. "You can be colleagues with somebody for 20 years and not learn the things you learn about them by being their department chair. It's very difficult." When this happens, refrain from sharing any sensitive personal information with others.

In the role of academic leader, it's easy to get in over your head in issues best left to experts such as legal counsel, psychologists, or upper administration.

As society becomes more litigious, academic leaders are finding themselves involved in more lawsuits and issues that could lead to lawsuits over things like student grades, ADA compliance, and promotion and tenure.

To reduce potential for lawsuits, Gunsalus recommends that academic leaders recognize their limitations and seek help from the appropriate experts.

"There are circumstances that department heads should not have to deal with on their own, and as part of their orientation and ongoing support, the institution needs to provide information about what those boundaries are and who is in the network," Gunsalus says. "The institution also has an obligation to ensure that when a chair calls, the response is actually helpful and supportive as opposed to punitive."

At the University of Illinois-Champaign-Urbana, the network includes a clinical psychologist, law enforcement, legal counsel, and representatives from the provost's office, human resources, and the dean of students.

Department chairs should meet with these people and their peers during orientation and in ongoing seminars. "A lot of it is providing a support group and letting peers interact across campus and find out that they're not the only ones facing these issues," Gunsalus says.

A brief document written by Gunsalus titled "Basic Guidelines for Handling Complaints" is available at <http://www.law.uiuc.edu/faculty/DirectoryResult.asp?Name=Gunsalus,+Kristina> at the bottom of the page.

**Contact C.K. Gunsalus at [gunsalus@uiuc.edu](mailto:gunsalus@uiuc.edu).**