



### **A “Step-Back” is actually a “Step-Forward” When Attempting to Make the Transition from Administrator to Faculty Within the Canadian College Environment**

*By Steven Jacobs*

#### **Abstract**

Many college faculty have sought and secured administrative positions. This type of transition is not uncommon. What is uncommon, however, is the transition back from an administrative position to a faculty position within Canadian colleges. There are many barriers and obstacles to this type of role transition which make it very difficult to do. I believe this to be extremely unfortunate because this type of role transition would be of benefit to all stakeholders--faculty, administration, support staff, and ultimately the persons we aim to serve in colleges: our students.

#### **Introduction**

At the 2014 Ontario College Administrative Staff Association (OCASA) Leaders and Innovation Conference, there was much discussion during the Presidents' panel about the difficulty in recruiting faculty into administrative positions. This was an issue for many of the college presidents and they also articulated how this is not a new problem for Ontario's colleges, but has been a fairly long-standing issue. A key factor is the permanence of the move; it is a very difficult road back to a faculty position once one chooses to participate in administration. It is nearly impossible to transition from an administrative position to a faculty position within the same educational institution. This type of role transition is simply not part of college culture nor policy. In order to make this type of transition from administration to faculty, the person is pretty much required to seek out faculty employment in another educational institution. I discovered this problem first-hand while attempting to make this exact journey in my career.

I started at an Ontario college as full-time faculty over nine years ago. After a couple of years, I became coordinator of a few programs and then, during the last four years, I was chair of my department. Some colleges refer to this position as “associate dean.” I thoroughly enjoyed the challenge and opportunity the chair's position afforded me. However, when I accepted the position I said to myself I would allow myself four to five years in this role, and then reassess my situation due to the fact that I came to the college originally because I love to teach.

I discovered after four years as chair that I missed teaching and wished to return to a faculty position. To facilitate this, I met with the executive group within my College to discuss my desire to return to a faculty position. Although they were not against this transition, they did warn me that this rarely happens and I was told it requires not only college management approval, but union approval as well. This is curious as Article 6 of the Academic Employees Collective Agreement states colleges have the function to: “hire, discharge, transfer, classify, assign, appoint, promote, demote, lay off, recall and suspend or otherwise discipline employees

subject to the right to lodge a grievance in the manner and to the extent provided in this Agreement” (Ontario Public Service Employees Union, 2014-2017, p. 7). I believe union approval was deemed to be necessary because the college would be creating a faculty position for me and I would not be going through the normal interview selection process for a posted position. Also, because of my then-current chair administrative position, I was not a union member. However, they promised to assist in any way they could with my goal of returning to the classroom. In the end, for reasons that remain unclear to me, I was not permitted to make the transition from chair to faculty. I found this extremely disappointing and as a result, I moved to a full-time faculty position at another Ontario college.

As I now reflect upon this process, I am struck by some interesting points. Firstly, this type of transition is common within the university environment. Many departmental/faculty administrative positions (particularly chair and assistant chair) are term positions. Professors transition from faculty to administration, and back to faculty. University professors are expected to engage in administrative service as it is viewed as necessary to the growth of the academic community within the university (Sadiku, Olasupo, & Nelatury, 2012). They then return to a faculty position after their term has expired. As well as facilitating a pool of administrative help, this model also increases institutional capacity through the retention of institutional memory. Rather than having one person in an administrative role for decades, there are many who have assumed and experienced the same role. This not only contributes to a collective pool of knowledge and skill, but ensures that when one person retires or leaves the university, their experience, knowledge and skill is not lost as others have had experience in the same role. Currently, this type of academic and administrative service is not required of or facilitated for college professors. I am not suggesting that colleges should aspire to be like universities; Ontario's colleges need to continue to create their own unique place in post-secondary education, and not simply imitate the research university model (Boyer, 1990).

However, given the difficulty the current college system has in attracting administrative talent who also understand teaching imperatives, the university model of facilitating this type of administrative movement for their faculty certainly has enough merit that something similar should be considered within the college system. Colleges were identified by Gill and Jones (2013) as facing a *leadership crisis*. Romero (2004) stated that the percentage of retiring college administrators was expected to reach 79% by 2012. An informal examination during the summer of 2015 revealed that there were six chair positions vacant in Greater Toronto Area colleges. And finally, recent chair positions in more than one Ontario college had to be re-posted due to a lack of suitable applicants. All of these issues point to how difficult it is to adequately fill these types of leadership positions in colleges. The articulation and promotion of clear pathways between faculty and administrative positions may better assist us in addressing some of these issues, and may also assist with this type of unprecedented faculty and administrative turnover (Amey, VanDerLinden & Brown, 2002).

My second point relates to the mission and values statements of Ontario colleges. Although these mission and value statements have varying foci, they are also somewhat similar. Many talk about supporting

learners, changing lives, educating students, and preparing the next generation of workers. But colleges are first and foremost educational institutions; this is their primary mandate. Therefore, it seems to me that it behooves them to place the best prepared faculty within their walls. Certainly colleges attempt to do this when hiring but, once hired, how does a faculty member become a better and more competent professor? I believe one way to assist faculty in becoming a more competent professor is through an experience within an administrative role. This experience provides faculty a much bigger picture of the college milieu and, as a result, would assist faculty to understand many of the pressures students face. I believe that my experiences as a faculty member and as coordinator were helpful to me during my term as Chair and vice versa. Each experience benefits the other. Amey, VanDerLinden, & Brown (2002) state that many college faculty and administrative persons have very varied backgrounds; but their focus tends to on teaching. This focus certainly appears to serve the educational mandate of colleges.

Many faculty rely on reflection, life-long learning, and peer-support. I know that, every time I enter and leave a classroom, I learn and hopefully grow from the encounter. However, this only occurs when one takes the time to engage in what Palmer (2007) refers to as authentic reflection. Authentic reflection is much more than simply wondering how today's class went. It involves reflecting upon the quality of one's selfhood and how this either enhances or retracts the way instructors relate to their students (Palmer, 2007). So, reflection is certainly one way an instructor can improve. But improvement and growth are also related to other experiences. As Dewey (1938) reminds us, every experience is educative. I know that I am a much more effective teacher because of my four years as a chair. I bring this knowledge and experience to every encounter with my students and it is valuable to my students, my colleagues and likely, even my new chair.

I do not blame my former college for not facilitating my transition from administration to faculty. This facilitation requires innovation and initiative given the organizational impediments and historical position of administrators within colleges. I clearly recall the surprise of some when I said to them I wished to return to a faculty position. It is almost viewed as a "step-back" when someone within the Ontario college system wishes to leave an administrative position for a faculty position. I think this mindset and organizational structure undermines the critical importance of teaching and the incredible value faculty bring to the college environment. This view demoralizes not only those who wish to make this type of career transition, but those faculty for whom teaching is their primary passion and whose passion most clearly aligns with the mission and mandate of the college system. As Ontario's colleges are primarily educational institutions, with teaching as their central mission, why is teaching viewed as a "step-back" from administrative work? I previously mentioned the type of role transition which is common within the university sector as they see this flexibility as a benefit to the organization and to the population they serve. Some universities, in recognizing the need to ensure competent faculty, have attempted to establish teaching-only positions: faculty positions which are focused more on teaching than on research (Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick, 2009). This is not to say that research is not important, but it appears the push for research has resulted in a culture where teaching is undervalued

and needs to be re-elevated (Edgerton, 1993). The teaching versus research dichotomy is certainly not the focus of this paper, but this debate has a long history in higher education as identified by Caplow and McGee (1958) who observed that many new faculty are hired as teachers, but evaluated as *researchers*.

So, if the goal of Ontario's colleges is teaching excellence, why is the type of transition I wished to make not more common? Why are colleges not moving to a more flexible model? My experience is that this type of transition is simply not done in the college environment and is therefore not really on anyone's radar, nor is it a subject that has been researched, and/or discussed. As stated, this issue was discussed during the Presidents' Panel in 2014, but there was no follow-up or plan to even examine this issue, let alone an attempt to try to solve it. As stated, after my nine years at my first college, I had experience as faculty, coordinator, and then chair. It seems these types of experiences at these various levels would serve me well (and the students I teach) if I returned to a faculty position within that same college. Romero (2004) states that college leaders are required to share goals and strategies at every level of the organization. I was afforded this opportunity, but was unable to actualize it within my first college due to the difficulty in transitioning from an administrative role to a faculty position.

Many college faculty and administrators are familiar with Ernest L. Boyer's (1990) model; some even base their direction and/or mission statement upon Boyer's views of scholarship-discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Other institutions use this model as the basis for their hiring and promotion processes (Wood, Biordi, Miller, Poncar, Snelson, Banks, & Hemminger, 1998). Boyer talks about how it is vital that educational institutions realize that one trajectory is not the right path for everyone, and that it is important to offer creative and flexible career paths for individuals. Boyer also states that teaching is the central mission of colleges, and that it is important to recognize the differing patterns of productivity which faculty present due to their age and levels of experience. My experiences as chair most definitely assist me in the classroom as my "wealth of intellectual offerings" (Boyer, p. 68) is much higher due to my past experiences. As a college administrator, I met with many students (one-on-one and in small groups) who were often struggling in their educational pursuit. These experiences have given me immense knowledge into how some students struggle navigating the college environment, and I bring this knowledge and experience with me in the classroom and when I now meet with students as a faculty member.

Rice (1991) discussed scholarship which recognizes the importance of knowledge gained through various practices and experiences, and suggests that scholars need to look for relationships between the parts and the whole, and try to address the needs of the larger (whole) world. I certainly became aware of this importance when I first became chair. This position demonstrated to me the importance of considering the entire college, while keeping a critical eye on the programs I chaired and the students we served. Maxwell (1984) also suggested a process of creating a shared world of experience which guides knowledge and policy development resulting in a more connected view of scholarship.

And finally, Burawoy (2005) articulated a scholarship model which also has relevance to this issue. Burawoy identified four types of knowledge: professional, critical, policy, and public. These types of knowledge are then examined under the context of whom they aim to serve. As college administrators and as college faculty, our ultimate aim is to serve our consumers: our students. And although Burawoy's model is focused heavily on sociology, it does encourage one to ask what is the purpose of knowledge (i.e., knowledge for whom? and knowledge for what?). This type of examination forces one to ensure the knowledge they gain and the knowledge they share is derived from vast past experiences and has the ultimate purpose to respond to those whom one serves (college students) (Holland, Powell, Eng, & Drew, 2010).

What all these various types of scholarship models have in common is their belief in how scholarship should not only be viewed with a much wider lens, but also how varied experiences allow one to see the larger picture and enable one to utilize these experiences to benefit their end consumer(s). Traditionally faculty members progress along a single path of scholarship (Jahangiri & Mucciolo, 2011). These models encourage the merging of different areas of scholarship and suggest a career path with increased flexibility, with an overlapping of diverse areas, leading to many creative opportunities (Jahangiri & Mucciolo). As stated, I firmly believe my past experiences as chair (and as faculty and coordinator) assist me today in the delivery of content and knowledge to those students I serve within the classroom. I also feel college faculty would consider transitioning to an administrative role if this transition was not seen as permanent and eternal.

It seems to me that, sometimes, there are silos within the colleges: administration; faculty; support; and the respective unions of the faculty and support staff. As Boyer (1990) reminds us, these groups should not operate in isolation, and the quality of education is strengthened when these levels not only work together, but when transitions from one to another are allowed and encouraged. I am not naive enough to suggest that it is simply up to colleges to address this situation. Faculty themselves need to create the impetus for this type of change in the college environment. The union needs to see such change as positive rather than threatening. Faculty need to desire to take on administrative positions and, if they realize that they may return to a faculty position in the future, possibly more faculty will be open to taking this journey. In this way, faculty are also responsible for giving scholarship a much richer and energetic meaning (Boyer, 1990).

In conclusion, if Ontario colleges wish to have, as Boyer (1990) states: "campuses where the scholarship of teaching is a central mission" (p. 64), one way to facilitate this is to allow and encourage faculty to take administrative positions and to allow them to return to a faculty position once their term is completed or when they re-evaluate their career goals and aspirations. The new leaders and scholars (administration and faculty) required for colleges must be grounded in knowledge and experiences which truly prepare them for the unique educational environments in which they operate (Romero, 2004). Training programs must set out new role models for them to emulate, and this training must address the policy dynamics, practice skills, and values and behaviours that support and affirm the equal and open climates in which college leaders work (Romero). One way to ensure tomorrow's college leaders and scholars possess the

knowledge and skills necessary to reach today's extremely diverse student body is to allow transitioning from faculty to administrative positions, and then back from administrative to faculty positions. This will greatly assist Ontario college education in taking a positive "step-forward" to the benefit all stakeholders: the college; the faculty, support and administrative personnel; and most importantly, the students we serve.

Future research projects to address this issue should examine the following questions:

- Are college faculty aware of this policy which makes it difficult to transition from an administrative position to a faculty position?
- Is this a concern to college faculty?
- Does this policy prevent them from seeking administrative roles?
- What is the history and the rationale of this policy? Why are these barriers present and what aim(s) do they serve?
- Is this policy consistent with other institutions?
- How well does this policy serve the college educational system? And finally,
- What steps would be required in order to address these issues across the sector?

The challenge of determining which models and strategies contribute best to strong academic leadership is not unique to the Ontario colleges. In this paper I have explored some of the challenges faced in the Ontario colleges. Thoughtful discussions, such as this commentary, may lead to a deeper understanding of the origin and nature of those challenges, and perhaps lead to some creative solutions as well. Readers are encouraged to continue this discussion.

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