It’s a Complete Career Change – Shifting from Full-Time Administrator to Full-Time Faculty Member

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Part of a larger study of former full-time student affairs administrators who have transitioned to full-time, tenure-track faculty roles in Student Affairs/Higher Education programs.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of participants with a minimum of 10 years of full-time administrative experience who transitioned directly from full-time administrator positions to full-time, tenure-track faculty roles, exploring their experiences through the lens of Transition Theory.

Little research has been conducted on this topic.

As new faculty members and former administrators ourselves, we wondered about the experiences of others.
What We Know from the Literature

  - Common challenges – adjusting to faculty culture, finding support, lower salaries

- Tierney & Rhoads (1994)
  - Faculty reported feelings of isolation, lack of collegiality, time constraints for teaching/research/service

- Eddy & Gaston-Gayles (2008)
  - Struggles with work-life balance, increased teaching loads, unclear expectations

- Kniess, Benjamin & Boettcher (in press)
  - Key transition areas include shifting from the administrative to faculty mindset, shifting to a faculty identity, and a change in self-perception within the academy

- Benjamin & Lowery (in press)
  - Practical advice for transitioning to faculty includes talking with current faculty, doing what faculty do (teaching and research), and consider institutional type/fit
Schlossberg’s 4 S’s

• **Situation** - consider trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, concurrent stress

• **Self** - consider the way you view life, demographic characteristics like gender/socioeconomic status/ethnicity, psychological resources like coping skills, optimism, spirituality

• **Support** - consider types - relationships, communities; consider functions – affirmation, honest feedback; consider measurement – stable supports, supports likely to change

• **Strategies** - consider things that modify the situation, control the meaning of the situation, aid in managing the stress

(Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. L, 2006)
Participants

• Part of a larger study of former administrators who transitioned to full-time, tenure track faculty roles.

• Criteria
  – Full-time, tenure track faculty member
  – Previous experience as a full-time student affairs administrator
  – Transitioned directly from administrator role to faculty role
  – Had been administrators for a minimum of 10 years
  – Student affairs/higher education graduate programs
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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years in Student Affairs Administration (Post-Master’s)</th>
<th>Administrative Position Types</th>
<th>Year Hired as a Tenure-Track Faculty Member</th>
<th>Year Applying for Tenure</th>
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<td>2014</td>
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Data Collection and Analysis

- **Demographic form** – name, institution, year hired as faculty, year anticipating applying for tenure, years as full-time administrator, student affairs roles held, preferred pseudonym

- **Individual interviews** – all by phone

- **Transcribed and returned to interviewees** – 9 of 11 responded with corrections or to acknowledge that the transcript accurately captured their comments

- **Constant comparative method** (Merriam, 2009)

- **Trustworthiness** – multiple investigators, peer debriefing, audit trail
Situation

• Triggers
  – Frustration with administrative work
  – Adjuncting

• Role change
  – Role change as loss
  – Role change as gain
  – Lack of role change/overlapping identities

• Duration
  – Took most 1 or more years to transition
  – Some aren’t even sure that they have fully transitioned yet
Trigger – *Frustration with Administrative Work*

- “I also around the same time [late in doctoral program] started to encounter a lot of, frankly, frustration in my administrative life at [my institution]. I felt like my values were pretty regularly in conflict with the institution’s values. . . .” (Abigail)

- “Partly it was that student affairs was, has sort of changed from . . . when I went into it, you know, and I had a lot of friends who were becoming Deans and were like, ‘Get away fast!’ [Laughs]. Including my partner so, [laughs]. So I mean, I was not sure that I wanted to continue in the life of, particularly residential life and crisis. It was just becoming so much compliance and crisis and stuff. . . .” (Alice)
Situation

Trigger – *Adjuncting*

• “I had always adjuncted... So I had always had my foot from that point on [after completing doctorate] in the academic realm teaching higher ed or student affairs program, so I think it was about a decade now, either nine or ten years where I had that taste of teaching. And I thought this was something I might really enjoy and be successful at.” (Ryan)

• “And we made it [the job] work with a potential of being an adjunct faculty member in their program. So I was super-excited that I would get to teach on the side... So I did that, but I just had so much fun and such a good response that I said, ‘The next job, I will have to look for a faculty position.’” (Jason)
Situation

Role Change - Role Change as Loss

“I said something [at a faculty meeting] and everyone just kind of looked at me and then started talking about something else altogether. And I thought, What is this? . . . I didn’t realize that when I was [in my administrative role] people had to care what I think. And now nobody cares what I think. [Laughs] That was a bit of a shock to me, to go from the top of an org chart, like second in command, to bottom of an org chart.” (Erica)

“. . . The first year or so was like, wow, I used to be really important and I’m not anymore [laughs] is kind of how I felt.” (Abigail)

“So whatever experience you had before then, you sort of just walked in and now you’re a blank slate again and I know there’s a little bit of that any time you transition into institutions but, certainly again, I feel like I’m, walking around trying to earn a little bit of street credibility at my new institution and terms of, I didn’t just show up here not having any practical experience in the field.” (Robin)
Role Change - *Role Change as Gain*

- “The final thing that I’d say is that for years I’ve been doing research but for the institution and all of that was very much guided by what the president’s council needed or by what the government or the accreditors needed, so I didn’t have very much say in what we researched. I certainly had some input and influence on how we did it, but the driving force of what that research looked like was not really under my control and honestly the things that the institution needed were things that I was not interested in researching. So the opportunity to have a full-time position that allowed me to teach would allow me to learn something new at this point in my career and then also do the research the research that I wanted to do seemed very appealing to me at that point.” (Robin)

- “And then also just the solidarity of the role. And I am quite comfortable with that. I loved having a team to supervise, but I don’t miss that aspect [Laughs].” (Beth)
Role Change - *Lack of Role Change/Overlapping Identities*

- Based on administrative job responsibilities “I was surrounded by data all the time and I had published at that point and have done one journal article and a book chapter so I was already kind of living the faculty life a little bit and I always liked that side of the institution and [had] been involved in it.” (Carol)

- “So when I was at [institution], the admin staff made so much fun of me because I was in the office every day, and they were like, and for most of the day, they’re like, ‘Why are you here? You’re the only faculty member we know that comes in every day.’” (Mitchell)

- “I still very much look at my chair of my department as my supervisor. . . . I very much am in the office very early, and I stay very late. . . . It’s those pieces where I feel very fortunate that I was trained in that way, but I feel better having a presence on campus more often than what my contract requires. . . .” (Ryan)
Situation

Duration

- Took most 1 or more years to transition

- Some are not sure that they have transitioned yet
  - “I think it’s still too early [to tell if I have fully transitioned]. . . I will still have a colleague, by the way I respond to a situation, we had an incident in which we were dealing with a very difficult situation with a student and the comment to me was, ‘Oh, that’s a really administrative response.’ Then I was like, ‘Well, you’re talking about legal issues.’” (Melissa)

  - “I don’t know that that’s happened for me yet. And I’m trying to figure out if there’s a way for me to hold onto both of those identities. And my attempts to do so so far have not been successful [laughs].” (Erica)
Self

• Personal and Demographic Characteristics
  – Gender - Family roles/parenting
  – Age

• Psychological Resources
  – Outlook - Imposter syndrome
  – Commitment - Can always go back
Personal and Demographic Characteristics – Gender: *Family Roles/Parenting*

• “I made a commitment that if I tried to do a faculty piece, it would be after the kids were out of high school. . . . I finished my doctorate, and I was really interested in being a faculty member. I just didn’t think that was the lifestyle I wanted at the time. Always wanted the position, wasn’t really sure I could manage the lifestyle at the time I finished due to the age of my kids.” (Melissa)

• “. . . My daughter was four, so I knew she was going to be entering kindergarten soon. And so the aspect of perhaps more flexibility in my job, being able to get her on and off the bus, those were important things to me and something I had been striving for.” (Beth)
Personal and Demographic Characteristics – *Age: Time of Life*

- “So here I am, 40 years old, starting over basically, my career, and that was humbling and challenging.” (Abigail)

- Challenges of being seen as a faculty member at same institution where she was an administrator – “And my age, it is because at my age, because I am still an assistant professor. Maybe once I hit associate professor because there are associate professors who look as old as you do – why are you still an assistant professor? . . . Some of the people in the early faculty roles are in their late 20s, early 30s. . . . For me it’s 40s.” (Melissa)

- “. . . It was hard for me at some point to start thinking about something new, especially being, I don’t want to say I’m old, but being seasoned enough in her career where it’s like, is it too late to completely go a different direction?” (Nancy)
Psychological Resources – *Outlook: Imposter Syndrome*

- “And I still have the imposter syndrome quite a bit. And I think that that is around probably my research more than anything. . . . But you know, every time I still get an acceptance from a journal and especially from – I got one recently from a journal that I never thought would publish my work. And I thought surely they’re going to make a call and say never mind on this.” (Mitchell)

- “The first year I felt like oh my god, I have no idea what I’m doing. . . [and after the second year] it started to feel like things were falling into place and so I started to feel like, ok I can do this. . . .” (Abigail)

- “So the internal stuff to me is still feeling like the poor girl from the wrong side of the tracks being corrected on her language in school. You know, all the angst about being a free and reduced lunch kid and do I belong here? Am I smart enough, imposter syndrome. So it’s, you know a lot of that’s wrapped up in my class and my gender and my race. . . . That’s my internalized shit working it’s way out, you know?” (Erica)
Psychological Resources – *Commitment: Can Always Go Back*

- “. . . I thought, you know, this is a perfect thing for me because it was a two-year appointment. And if I hate it I can go back to administration. But I loved it!” (Erica)

- “. . . The first year that I was in this job, I thought about leaving and going back to student affairs.” (Abigail)
Support

• Three main sources of support for participants:

  – **Family** – Partners and Parents

  – **Friends** – Colleagues and Mentors

  – **Institutional** – Department Chair, Other Faculty and Colleagues
Family – *Partners and Parents*

• "She goes, 'Well, here's the announcement.' And I said – she said, we both out of one mouth basically said, 'You've got to apply for that.' And so that was – the rest is history." (Jason)

• "I think I had a unique advantage because I had two parents who were both faculty." (Abigail)
Support

Friends – *Colleagues and Mentors Not Assigned to Them*

- “We didn’t have a tenure-track faculty member until about six years ago. So four of us are tenure track, one’s recently been tenured, and the other three are not yet. So we are all new and sort of building lot, and there are a lot of opportunities to build this program but I think that the fact that we’re new, we are all very supportive of each other and that has made a huge difference.” (Robin)

- “So, I have one really good colleague who is a new assistant professor in our program and she's based in another town, but when she's here we go to lunch together.“ (Jason)
Institutional – *Department Chair and Other Faculty and Colleagues*

- "My chair, I think he did something very, very smart, he was a big advocate of mine, and he also gave new faculty mentors in the department, so for my very first year, once a month, I would go out with another faculty colleague and we would get coffee and talk." (Ryan)

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Coping Mechanisms

• Information Seeking
• Direct Action
• Inhibition of Action
Coping Mechanism – Information Seeking

• “I talked to a lot of friends I have some mentors that were on my dissertation committee that were faculty where I did my PhD. So I talked to them quite a bit about not only interviewing for the position but to make sure I understood what I needed to do, but also the ins and outs of being a faculty member and things that I should look for. So, I really talked to a lot of other people trying to figure out what I was supposed to be doing.” (Carol)

• “I talked with a lot of people... and, I basically said, help me, what does this look like? And I got some really great advice: make sure that you are adjuncting as much as you can, and getting that teaching experience... be sure that you can show that you can balance scholarship, research, or scholarship, teaching and service.” (Ryan)

• “I just spoke with a lot of people who had made the transition and who were faculty members and faculty members who were in student affairs and higher education and then faculty members in other disciplines with women who tried to manage with having a family and all those kinds of things.” (Melissa)
Coping Mechanism - Direct Action – *Teaching and Research*

- “I did a few different things. I first, I scurried to get a monograph contract with ASHE through the ASHE reader series because I knew that I didn’t have enough publications and I needed to have something that I could do that was impressive and that would quickly get published and out there into the world. So I did that. I started working on transitioning my dissertation into at least one article. I re-worked my CV so that I could highlight both my teaching experience and my research or scholarship experience. I started teaching as an adjunct literally the week after I graduated... So I knew that I needed to pretty quickly and continuously start getting teaching gigs so that I would have evaluations to send and I also started getting my writing kind of work in order.” (Abigail)
Coping Mechanism – Direct Action – *Interacting with Student Affairs*

- “I’m always very aware in situations with student affairs colleagues that... I have to be the one that walks over and says, “Hello” to them. I have to be the one to ask them about their work and part of it is that I want to continue that relationship because we have a good strong partnership with the division of student affairs.” (Melissa)

- “I remember the first week on campus I had coffee with the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs... and she says, “It’s going to be so great and I already talked with our Registrar about administrative roles for you post-tenure.” And this is, you know, the first week – the first half-hour of meeting her. I said, “You know, I’m really sorry, I don’t mean to offend you, but I will never ever be an administrator again in student affairs.” And she just sort of looked at me and I think the relationship sort of took a hit at that point. And the meeting was done fairly quickly after that.” (Jason)
Coping Mechanism - Inhibition of Action – *Navigating Politics*

- “I do think holding back and keeping to myself for a while and just observing for the first couple of months - How people were interacting, making sure that I wasn’t overstepping by boundaries and that I understood the political culture of the organization that I had entered because it was a different world. I think that even though it was somewhat isolating it did help me know whom I could turn to and once I figured that out I ended up having some good mentoring relationships that developed with people who would give advice without judging the questions you were asking, and other people would. So I had to know who I could ask questions of and I think holding back allowed me to figure out who I could go to and who I could trust and who I could really rely on to give me some honest answers and to point me in the right direction.” (Carol)
Conclusions

- Adjunct teaching and frustration with administrative work served as primary triggers for making the transition. Increasing their research activity was a strategy participants used to make the transition possible.

- Role change experiences varied, with some individuals perceiving a status gain, others a status loss, and still others feeling like they were straddling both student and academic affairs. That role change was particularly evident in some interactions with student affairs administrators, and faculty identified strategies that worked for them to manage those relationships and connections.
Conclusions

- Participants considered their family roles in making the decision to transition and some also acknowledged that they were starting this new career at a later age than many other faculty members, which is likely common for those shifting from administration to faculty.

- Participants identified experiencing imposter syndrome, despite their 10+ years of professional experience in higher education.

- It takes at least a year to make the transition, and because former administrators had a different career prior to the faculty role, many saw returning to administration as an option if the transition to faculty was not successful.
Conclusions

• Transition support came from individuals primarily within higher education. However, they did not identify professional associations as elements of support in their transition.

• Mentors as supports were friends for some participants and assigned to the role for others. Department chairs also were generally helpful in preparing for the transition.

• Participants found that talking to others, as well as using that information to determine who to trust with regard to politics, served as a helpful strategy for the transition.
Recommendations

- For those considering the shift from administrator to faculty:
  - Adjunct teach if possible.
  - Do research as an administrator.
  - Talk to other faculty about their experiences.

- For those making the transition:
  - Expect it to take a year or so and recognize that this is a complete career change, not an extension of the administrator experience.
  - Depending on your administrative role, the shift may be a perceived increase or decrease in status.
  - Consider what kind of relationship you wish to have with the Student Affairs division and seek that out.
  - Anticipate that your entry into the faculty world may be later than your peers in other disciplines.
Recommendations

• For professional associations:
  – Professional associations have an opportunity to play a significant role in this exploration/transition.
  – Programming related to the transition should provide transition information inclusive of different institutional types.

• More research is needed around the role of gender in this transition process.
Questions??
References


• Kniess, D., Benjamin, M., & Boettcher, M. (in press). Negotiating faculty identity in the transition from student affairs practitioner to tenure-track faculty. *College Student Affairs Journal*.


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Thank you for joining us today!

Please remember to complete your customized online evaluation following the conference.

See you in Philly in 2018!