

1-1-2010

The University Chameleon: Identity and Time Issues Faced by Faculty in Dual Positions

Eric Daffron

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Daffron, Eric (2010) "The University Chameleon: Identity and Time Issues Faced by Faculty in Dual Positions," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 77.

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss4/77>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-Reviewed Journals at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository.

Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

My transition into full-time administration came gradually. As a young assistant professor of English, I got my first taste of administration when I accepted a position as coordinator of my university's study-abroad programs. Later I served an enriching experience as director of my university's honors college. With both positions, I remained on faculty, teaching usually a couple of courses each semester. Over time, I felt a certain dissonance in my dual role. A double agent of sorts,¹ I felt pulled-in terms of time and especially identity-between my role as faculty member and my role as administrator. In fact, I came to a juncture in my career when I knew that I had essentially two choices: to return to full-time faculty or to move into full-time administration. I chose the latter, thereby resolving, at least in part, the tension that I had earlier felt.

In retrospect, I wonder about the special circumstances of the faculty member in a dual role. The faculty member who assumes part-time administrative duties clearly accrues benefits. Sometimes the individual sees a pay increase along with these new duties. In addition, a small administrative position can provide the individual with invaluable institutional knowledge that could lead, if later desired, to full-time administration. Yet, if my experience holds true for others, the dual position can also create conflict, both personal and temporal. The individual, neither completely faculty nor completely administrator, may feel torn between the often competing identities of both positions. In addition, the individual may face challenges balancing two sets of duties in a single work schedule. Indeed, both positions involve different timelines, different priorities, and even different rhythms throughout the day, week, and semester.

Institutions also accrue benefits from this arrangement. Otherwise, the practice of asking faculty members who show managerial, organizational, and other administrative skills to assume administrative positions would not be so widespread and longstanding.² This practice seems particularly prevalent at small institutions. Small institutions may have programs similar to those found at their larger counterparts, but, thanks to economies of scale, small institutions cannot always devote a full-time staff position to a particular set of duties. As a result, they sometimes release a faculty member from, say, one course and reassign that time to administrative duties. In addition to cost savings, this practice provides the institution with flexibility. If, for whatever reason, the institution decides to eliminate the administrative position or absorb its duties into another position, the institution can reassign the faculty member's time once again to teaching without making the difficult decision of terminating a full-time staff member.

Considering the financial state of higher education, the practice of assigning faculty to administrative duties may increase in the future. Thus, if my contention is true-that dual positions, though rewarding, put pressures on the identity and the time of the individuals who occupy them-institutions should pay careful attention to how they assign faculty to these positions, what expectations they have for these individuals, and how they nurture these faculty with dual roles throughout their tenure in the positions. In

what follows, I support my contention with testimonies from faculty in dual positions and, in the end, offer recommendations to universities and colleges that assign faculty to dual positions.

Definition

Before I turn to these testimonies, the term 'faculty in dual positions' deserves clarification. This term could arguably refer to department chairs or deans. Yet, because faculty report directly to them, department chairs usually remain oriented towards the faculty ranks from which they came. And, although deans are typically classified as senior administrators at an institution, they too remain oriented, though perhaps to a lesser degree, towards the faculty. Indeed, according to Johnson, Hanna, and Olcott (2003), "[D]eans and chairpersons are conditioned to protect their faculty and organizational structures from both internal and external change forces because these forces challenge the system that resulted in their career progression" (p. 28). While the plight of both department chairs and deans merits continued exploration, it is instead a whole host of coordinators and directors-of-honors programs, assessment, international programs, faculty development, academic advising, and so forth-with faculty status and/or duties whose part-time administration preoccupies this essay. As faculty members who typically do not supervise other faculty directly, these coordinators and directors occupy a unique place in the institution worth investigating.

Testimonies from Faculty with Dual Positions

To test my thesis that dual roles place faculty in beneficial but often conflicted positions, I invited half a dozen faculty with dual positions at one small regional public master's institution to sit on interviews. All interviewees, according to their institutional contracts, bore both faculty and administrative titles, either coordinator or director, at the time of their interviews. In none of the cases did their positions require them to supervise faculty or to serve twelve-month contracts. All of the individuals taught in the classroom as part of their administrative duties, as part of their faculty duties, in addition to their contractual duties, or as some combination of the three. In fact, at least half of the interviewees performed at least 50% of their contractual duties in the classroom. During the interviews, I asked the faculty with dual positions nine specific questions and one open-ended question, which can be found in the appendix. I have organized their responses under three overarching themes-identity, time, and other issues-or incorporated them into my closing recommendations.³

Identity

The issue of identity elicited most of the comments from the interviewees, not simply because most of the questions concerned identity, but because, almost regardless of the question at hand, issues of identity repeatedly surfaced. Some comments addressed self-identification. A majority of the interviewees usually self-identified as faculty because they found doing so easier or quicker, because they began their careers as faculty, or because they considered themselves essentially faculty despite their administrative duties. Yet, even for those individuals who self-identified as faculty or who found the faculty title easier to explain to others, they recognized that different sets of circumstances might prompt them to claim their administrative position instead of their faculty role. For example, two of the interviewees reported that they often referred to themselves as administrators because their administrative positions sounded more prestigious. Two interviewees drew the line of identification spatially. While one self-identified as faculty on campus and as administrator off campus (unless he

was addressing a discipline-related question), the other self-identified in exactly the reverse places. One interviewee redrew the line of identification within the self, marking a distinction between administrator (her employment, described implicitly as extrinsic), on the one hand, and educator (her personal identity, described implicitly as intrinsic), on the other hand. Another interviewee explained that, when writing a letter, he always used both titles but, depending on the audience, might place one title before the other in the signature block. An official form of communication, a business letter typically identifies the sender in both his signature (presumably a unique marker of personal identity) and his title (a label for professional identity). Collectively, these comments reveal the complex and multifaceted ways in which faculty in dual positions self-identify. Indeed, as one interviewee put it colorfully, having a dual role is like being “a chameleon, ... depending on what leaf I’m on.”

Other comments from the interviewees addressed institutional identification. Many of the interviewees indicated that their campus community did not attribute to them a single or stable identity either because they currently served the university in different roles or because they had served it in different roles over the course of their careers. One interviewee apparently did not mind her multiple roles but revealed the mental tricks that she played to switch from one to the other: “You have to use separate parts of your brain.... I honestly have to click something on in my brain when I go in a class to lecture, and that is not the part of my brain functioning when I am coordinating a program.” Her comments illustrate graphically how faculty in dual roles must daily juggle different skills and mindsets. Another interviewee, experiencing the separation from his supposedly primary identity as faculty member, worried that members of his home academic department might no longer think of him as a fellow faculty member. As he put it almost elegiacally, “I think most people, including myself, would like to be ... thought of first as part of the fraternity of faculty.” Other interviewees experienced potential conflicts with faculty in their new roles. For instance, one interviewee explained that in her administrative role, she sometimes asked faculty to do something that she herself might not have been willing to do as a faculty member. Another interviewee explained that sometimes faculty would come to him with concerns about a current campus project or initiative, expecting him to sympathize with their cause, but as an administrator, he understood why the university had chosen to follow a particular path. As a result, he often felt like a “traitor” among his fellow faculty.

These remarks suggest that some of interviewees, neither completely faculty nor completely administrators, experienced difficulties in moving from one role to the other. Illuminating their arduous negotiation of identity, Wegner (1998) explained that individuals who belong to more than one “community of practice”-in this case, administration and faculty-must reconcile their “multimembership” (p. 159). Wegner went on to explain, in terms that resonate with the plight of my interviewees, that “different forms of accountability may call for different responses to the same circumstances” and “elements of one repertoire may be quite inappropriate, incomprehensible, or even offensive in another community” (p. 160). “Reconciliation,” Wegner’s term for balancing these multiple community memberships, may result in “successful resolutions” or in “a constant struggle” (p. 160). My interviewees mentioned struggles at least as often as resolutions.

Despite these struggles, some of the interviewees cited institutional benefits to their dual identities. For example, one interviewee said that she could more easily relate to faculty and encourage them to adopt certain teaching practices because they saw her, at least in part, as a fellow faculty member. Other interviewees claimed to possess double vision: an ability to see both sides of an issue, especially when conflicting institutional interests are at stake. Indeed, as one interviewee put it, “Sometimes an

administrator doesn't see what a faculty member sees, and vice versa." Still other interviewees went so far as to say that their dual positions could potentially heal the proverbial rift between faculty and administration. As one interviewee waxed philosophically:

One of the worst things ... is the assumption that there is some vast difference between faculty and administration. There shouldn't be any real theoretical or professional or philosophical difference between people who occupy the role of faculty member and those who occupy the role of administrator.... You've got to be able to talk to people on both sides in their own language.... [Y]ou forget what that language is if you don't occasionally have a dual responsibility.

While this interviewee ascribes multilingual talents to faculty in dual roles, one wonders if translation, as well as double vision and multilingualism, might belong in their bag of tricks. In addition to speaking each side's language, as my interviewee eloquently put it, faculty in dual roles traverse that linguistic divide, translating the concerns of the administration to the faculty, and vice versa.

Time

After identity, the issue of time elicited most of the comments from the interviewees. Some of the interviewees voiced difficulties in managing their day consistently and predictably because both roles involve multifaceted duties (teaching, advising, planning, programming, and so forth). Even when their contracts indicated a relatively even split between the two roles, at least two interviewees indicated that the campus community expected them to spend more time on the administrative role than on the faculty role. As one interviewee put it, "[P]eople expect me to be all places at once." To resolve some of the time conflict, another interviewee set up two offices: "I try to divvy [my time] up by separating my office duties-going to one office for the [faculty role] and one office for the administrative role." This faculty member in a dual role erected clear spatial and temporal boundaries between each role. Interestingly, three other interviewees voiced the opposite opinion: Either the campus administration or the campus in general did not expect them to spend as much time in administration as in the classroom or did not value their time away from their discipline, even if the administrative duties necessitated at least as much time as the faculty duties. One interviewee went so far as to indicate that his administrative duties interfered with his obligations to his classroom and to his discipline. As he explained regretfully, "I have never thought ... that I was devoting the amount of time to preparation of classes and intellectual research that I needed to." Although their experiences varied, the interviewees collectively voiced concerns about managing their time effectively.

Other Issues

While most of my questions addressed issues of identity and time, occasionally my questions prompted the interviewees to mention additional challenges as well as benefits of occupying dual roles. Two interviewees cited the challenge of having more than one direct supervisor. One interviewee felt as if she were "being pulled in different directions." Another interviewee explained, "[I]n one role I answer to the dean, [while in another] role I answer to the provost. So I ... have two masters.... It would be nice to have one person above me." Even the best of supervisory relationships can add stress to working conditions. These individuals have double the pressure. Supervisory relationships can become even more stressful if, as an interviewee indicated, one supervisor discounts work performed in one role when evaluating performance in the other role. Without clear expectations, these individuals may feel that performing the duties of one role will inevitably compromise their ability to perform the duties of the

other role to their or their supervisors' satisfaction.

In addition to challenges, the interviewees cited benefits of their dual positions-both to themselves and to their institution. A couple of them found building programs the most rewarding part of their administrative work, while a majority, despite the unpredictable demands on their time, claimed that their dual roles reduced boredom, stagnation, or burnout. Some of the interviewees mentioned campus-wide relationships as the most fulfilling part of their work. For instance, one interviewee noted the wider impact on campus that his dual role afforded, while another interviewee learned to appreciate other disciplines through her more expansive work on campus. "It keeps me from being morosely self-centered," she explained, "of assuming that my academic specialty is more important than it is on a campus." Having administrative duties, she continued, "taught me early on to respect other people's methods of doing things." Other interviewees indicated that their administrative duties allowed them to develop skills that would make them marketable or would apply to their classroom instruction. Some of the interviewees also believed that universities save money by asking one individual to perform two sets of duties. Their conviction is supported by their collective testimonies to the amount of time that they must spend on both roles combined. Apparently, universities get more for their money by asking faculty to assume these positions.

Closing Recommendations

While several individuals from one institution cannot represent the wealth of diverse experiences of faculty with dual positions, my conclusion, based on this evidence and on personal experience, is that faculty with dual positions do share common experiences. Generally speaking, all the interviewees found occupying dual positions beneficial. Indeed, many of them claimed that their dual positions provided them with opportunities for personal and professional growth and prevented them from becoming stagnant in one role or the other. Yet consistently throughout these interviews, I heard concerns about personal identity and time management not unlike my own in the previous stage of my career. While they may have invoked different terms, most of these individuals felt like double agents, torn between their two roles. Administrators should address these concerns as they consider appointing faculty to part-time administrative positions. Based largely on the testimonies of the individuals whom I interviewed as well as my own personal experiences, I offer the following recommendations for administrators to consider and to adapt to their circumstances:

Identity

If an institution intends to appoint faculty to part-time administrative roles on a routine basis, it should establish an ongoing mentorship program that pairs new with more experienced administrators. Mentors can prepare faculty in dual roles for potential identity crises. In the choice words of the interviewees, dual positions turned them into "chameleons" and "floaters" because they could move agilely from faculty to administration or from one administrative duty to the next. Many of the interviewees considered their fluid identities and keen abilities to see the university from multiple perspectives among their greatest assets. Yet, while the terms 'chameleon' and 'floater' attribute to these individuals an almost free-wheeling ability to maneuver throughout the fabric of the university, at least one interviewee worried that faculty saw him as a "traitor" to the faculty cause, since he could see the administration's perspective on university business. Aided by good mentors, faculty with dual positions can learn to cope with the pain of no longer feeling at home in either role and with the growing distance that they may feel from both their academic departments and their disciplines. Good mentors

can also help these individuals establish new goals and new research projects as well as new ways to assess work satisfaction. Faculty often find satisfaction in completed research projects or in successful students. However, as one interviewee with a significantly reduced teaching load lamented, "I miss the fact that fewer of my students are out there." Faculty with dual positions must now find their proper legacies elsewhere, perhaps in new programs that outlive their administrative appointments and in new faculty whom they mentor to follow in their footsteps.

Mentorship programs can help faculty in dual roles adjust to more than their new, potentially conflicted identities. They can also provide ongoing training, especially in the first couple of years. All too often, an institution assumes that faculty assigned to administrative duties automatically know how to manage budgets, supervise employees, and plan programs, when, in fact, these individuals have spent many years learning how to conduct research in their disciplines. As one of my interviewees suggested, the success of these individuals depends on preparing them for these new duties. Training could include workshops on budget management and personnel relations as well as leadership seminars sponsored by the institution or other organizations. Training sessions not only will prepare these individuals for their new roles but also will give them needed support and guidance if they aspire to move fully into administration.

Time

Even before the individual accepts the position and joins a mentorship program, the appointing administrator should initiate a frank discussion about the time that the two positions will take. While it is true, as one interviewee attested, that from the outset both parties may not know the actual time needed to perform both sets of duties, the appointing administrator should make a conscientious effort to evaluate and assess the situation, not just annually, but periodically throughout the first and second years of the appointment. In some cases, the individual appointed to the position may learn, not that the two sets of duties are impossible to perform under reasonable time constraints, but rather that a dual role may require new time-management techniques. As one interviewee explained, "Having the time to reflect, to sit, to close the office door, to not have to answer the phone, to answer a text, or check e-mail, to think, to make a list, that is extremely difficult to find during the day, so I work at night."

In any case, once the appointing administrator and the faculty member come to an initial understanding of the time needed to perform the administrative duties, they must consider at least two additional time-related issues. First, often faculty in dual positions receive extended contracts. However, the meaning of a contract more than nine months and less than twelve months is a matter of some debate. If the contract is extended to ten months, for example, does the ten-month contract literally mean that the employee starts on one day and ends on another? Perhaps the extra month assumes that the individual will work a number of days or hours interspersed throughout the summer that collectively amount to approximately one month. Either way, the university should specify the meaning of the contract length so that both parties understand the terms of the agreement. Without that clarification, the faculty member in a dual role is placed in the awkward situation of wanting to meet institutional needs while at the same time trying to avoid the inevitable job creep towards a de facto twelve-month contract. Second, universities often release faculty in dual positions from one or more courses per semester to compensate for the extra time that their new duties will take. Yet, as one interviewee remarked, "I think we need another word for it." 'Release' sounds as if "I am being released from the cage of responsibilities." The pejorative connotations of the word 'release' may exacerbate the sometimes

contentious relationship between faculty and administrators. Thus, the appointing administrator may want to choose more neutral contractual language in addition to indentifying the appropriate number of courses that the faculty member will teach.

Other Issues

Before the individual accepts the position, the appointing administrator should also hold an open discussion between the faculty member and all direct supervisors about general expectations that go beyond identity and time to supervision and evaluation. These expectations should delineate which of the individual's duties report to which supervisor. This point is not as clear cut as it might seem. One of the understandable temptations of any individual in a dual role is to consult with one supervisor about issues that come under the other supervisor's jurisdiction, not in an attempt to subvert authority, but because the nature of the dual position itself-time constraints, overlapping duties, unclear report lines, and so forth-sometimes makes consulting with one supervisor rather than with another easier and more convenient. These expectations should also extend to the criteria against which the individual's performance will be evaluated. For example, professional development, in which all university employees are expected to participate, may not be defined the same in each role. Appointing administrators should clarify which forms of professional development-publications, conference presentations, workshop attendance, professional memberships, and so forth-will count towards which annual evaluation, faculty or administration. This issue is, of course, a two-way street. Not only must supervisors make their expectations clear, but the individual should consider creative ways to meet these expectations in a dual role. For example, depending on the scope of the administrative position, the faculty member in the dual role should consider scholarly projects and other professional activities that would bring together the two roles in innovative ways.

In these challenging economic times, universities will probably continue to appoint faculty to part-time administrative roles, in part, as a cost-savings measure. Institutions owe these individuals the care and attention needed to be successful and to adjust to new challenges both at the point of initial appointment and throughout their tenure. Eventually, these individuals may reach a point, as I did, when they must decide whether to return to faculty or to pursue a career in full-time administration. Until they reach that point, these chameleons-if they are properly nurtured-will deftly navigate the institution, successfully bridge the divide between faculty and administration, and, in the process, ably lead their universities.

Notes

¹ I adapt this term from an essay of the same title that uses the term to describe the academic department, "working equally in the cause of its discipline and its institution, linking its membership to both venues" (Zemsky, 1996, p. 5). Like the academic department, the faculty member with a dual position serves the institution at the intersection between faculty, who usually show allegiance first to their disciplines and their departments, and administrators, who devote their energies to larger institutional units, if not the whole institution.

² It is unclear how many individuals historically or currently have occupied dual positions, since no national clearing house for this information exists.

³ Each interviewee, who participated in this study voluntarily, signed a consent form and sat for an approximately thirty-minute interview, which I tape recorded. After each interview, I transcribed or summarized relevant comments and later invited each interviewee to review the comments and to sign another consent form attesting to the general accuracy of the comments. As a condition of their participation, I agreed to report the comments anonymously without reference to a particular position or an institutional affiliation. In addition, I have aggregated or generalized the comments or, in the case of individual comments, deliberately scrambled the pronouns, beginning with a masculine pronoun and alternating between masculine and feminine pronouns until the end of the essay.

References

- Johnson, M. J., Hanna, D. E., & Olcott, D., Jr. (Eds.). (2003). *Bridging the gap: Leadership, technology, and organizational change for deans and department chairs*. Madison, Wisconsin: Atwood Publishing.
- Wegner, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Zemsky, R. (Ed.). (1996). Double agent. *Policy Perspectives*, 6 (3), 3-11.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Currently, your position is part faculty and part administrator. How do you usually identify yourself as faculty or as administrator? Please elaborate.
2. Do you ever identify yourself more as faculty or more as administrator under different sets of circumstances? If so, please explain.
3. How do you think that the campus community typically identifies you-as faculty or as administrator? Why so?
4. How much time does the campus community expect you to devote, or assume that you devote, to each role? Are these expectations consistent with your own estimation of the time that you should devote to each role? Please elaborate.
5. What is the most difficult part of balancing your two roles? Please elaborate.
6. What is the most rewarding part of occupying your two roles? Please elaborate.
7. Do you ever feel that the two roles are in conflict with each other? Please elaborate.
8. Is it beneficial to the university to have individuals like you who occupy dual positions? If so, how so?
9. Is it beneficial to you and others like you to occupy dual positions such as yours? If so, how so?

10. Is there anything else about your dual position that you would like to share?

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]