

Commentary

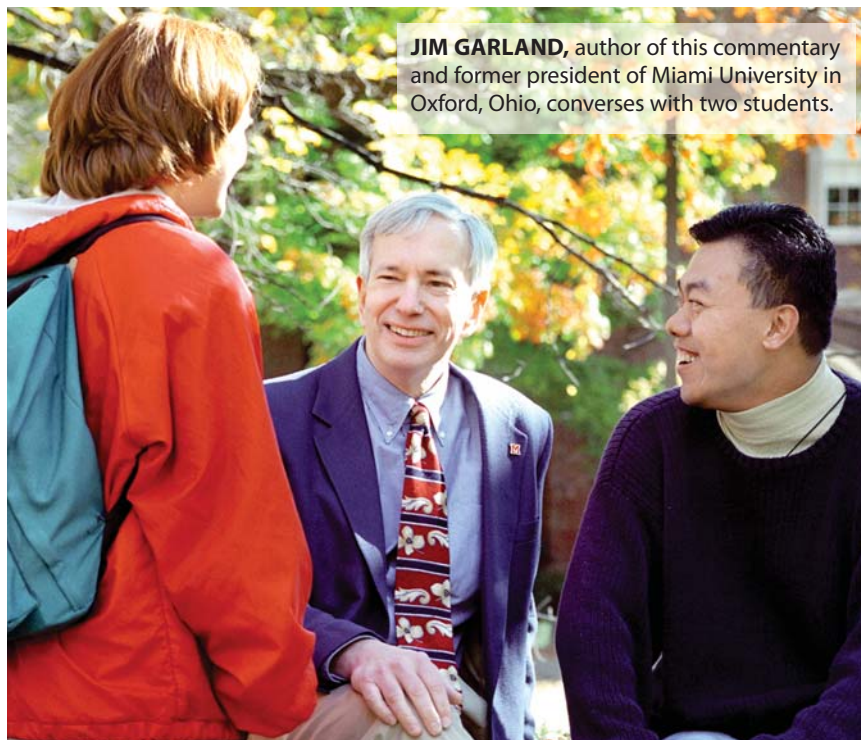
Advice to would-be physics administrators

Years ago, shortly after I'd been named chairman of the 60-member physics department faculty at the Ohio State University, a tenured professor in my department came to see me. A once-promising experimentalist in his early fifties, the man had seen his career flounder: He had lost his grant support, had not published for nearly a decade, and had a reputation as a lackadaisical, uninspiring teacher. He had become, frankly, an embarrassment to his colleagues, who saw him as a deadweight in the department.

His somber pitch to me was that he had been suffering from a long illness that sapped his energy, left him chronically depressed, and nearly wrecked his marriage. Fortunately, he said, his medical condition had stabilized, his personal problems were behind him, and he was anxious to get his career back on track. He needed a semester's relief from teaching to read the literature, clean up his lab, and revitalize his research program. If I would give him a research leave, he promised to work tirelessly to prove himself to his colleagues.

Research leaves were precious jewels; the department had only one per semester to award. On the other hand, this faculty member had another 15 years before retirement. Could he really turn himself around? I decided to take a chance.

A few days later, a group of young assistant professors came to see me. They were furious. "Garland," they said, incredulity in their voices, "you've wasted our research leave on a lazy, unproductive has-been! You should be investing in



JIM GARLAND, author of this commentary and former president of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, converses with two students.

MIAMI UNIVERSITY

the department's future! What the hell were you thinking?"

Of course, I couldn't share a faculty member's confidential medical and personal information, so from their viewpoint, my decision made no sense. Worse, it turned out they were right. That professor did nothing to turn himself around, and eventually I realized I'd been flimflammed. That was lesson number one in my budding administrative career, courtesy of the school of hard knocks.

Welcome to academic administration, a world where the learning curve is steep, where days are often filled with ambiguity and conflict, where common sense and careful planning can be sabotaged by external forces, and where people you've never met will likely despise you. I heard a professor once refer to her mild-mannered dean as a "jackbooted Nazi thug." His crime: He had turned down her department's budget request.

Does this life sound desirable to you? Do you believe you could contribute meaningfully to your department, your

college, or your university? And the big question: Do you have the temperament and ability to provide the leadership that academic administration calls for?

I'll answer the last question first: Sorry, probably not. Competent and talented administrators are a very rare breed. That's why universities with thousands of faculty members recruit department chairs, deans, provosts, and presidents externally. And it's why hoped-for white knights so often turn out to be flops.

Administrative jobs in academia have grown enormously difficult and complicated, in part because the collegial model of academic governance has broken down. Search online for the terms "administrative bloat" and "breakdown of shared governance in higher education," and see how many hits you get. Sometimes it seems like faculty and administration live in warring camps.

Obviously, there's no checklist of administrator qualities that guarantees job success. But some general personality traits seem to augur well for it. If you

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want to test the waters, here are a few questions to ask yourself. My examples are drawn from academia, but the general rules apply to any position that involves supervising other people.

► **Are you a laser beam or a floodlight?**

Physics rewards deep thinkers, smart people who can advance the discipline by zeroing in on narrow, complex ideas. If you lie awake at night worrying about topological singularities or whether you've somehow missed a data artifact, you're probably a laser beam. Floodlights tend to be generalists with broad perspectives—right-brain thinkers who instinctively gravitate to the big picture and leave the details to the experts. Floodlights try to seize the middle ground, seeking reconciliation while exploring different points of view and avoiding partisan stances. Good administrators are usually—but not always—floodlights.

► **How are your interpersonal skills?**

I don't mean extrovert skills, like working crowds, schmoozing donors, or buttering up politicians; those are possibly useful traits, but they are not at the heart of effective leadership. Rather, successful administrators have to be good listeners who are instinctively empathetic and who like people. They avoid being power grabbers and are self-confident without being narcissistic. Good administrators go out of their way to seek advice and informed feedback and to surround themselves with staff who will challenge them. Rejection and criticism go with the territory, and leaders take it without feeling undermined or motivated to seek retribution. Big egos need not apply.

► **Why do you want the job?** That is probably the most difficult question, because the answers are often buried under a subconscious curtain. Of course, some answers are pragmatic: You need the salary boost, you're weary of teaching, it's your turn at the helm, and so forth. Those are reasonable considerations, but the larger question is this: Will the work bring you personal satisfaction? You have to figure out what will provide the counterbalance to attending endless committee meetings, answering emails, writing reports, negotiating with bosses, conferring with staff, and drafting strategic plans. The nuts and bolts of administrative work can be frightfully boring, and if you want the job merely because it's prestigious, because it's the next rung

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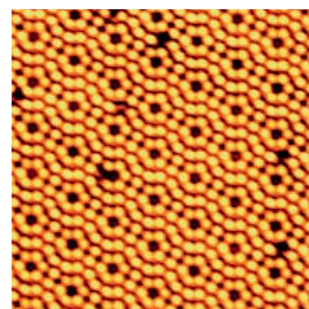
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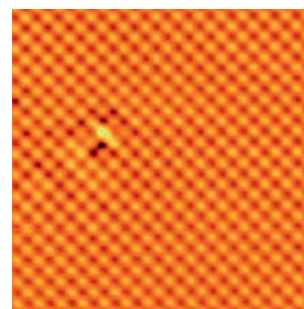


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on a career ladder, because your spouse is urging you on, or because you want to please your deceased father, then you're going to dislike the work.

If you want the job because you're sick and tired of the way the provost has mistreated the department or because you can't stand the current leadership, you need to check your motivations. If you believe that merely better championing your department's excellence would result in new faculty lines, more travel funds, and a new wing on the lab, then, oh dear, are you in for disappointment; you need to come up with smarter strategies. (Hint: Going to the provost with your hand out isn't one of them.)

Years ago I was dean of Ohio State's College of Mathematical and Physical Sciences, and I met individually every week with my department chairs. I started each conversation by asking how things were going.

"Excellent," the chair of department A would tell me. "Our senior faculty are going great guns, our students are thrilled with our new curriculum, and we've never had stronger candidates for our graduate programs. We're really on the move."

The chair of department B would say, "I'm worried. Professor Wong has an offer from Berkeley; we've matched the salary, but I think we may lose him. The committee members drafting our strategic plan have unrealistic expectations, and I don't know how to rein them in. Also, the department is unanimously recommending tenure for two assistant professors, and I have reservations about one of them. I'm not sure what to do."

Guess which chair I trusted? When department B's chair said she really needed something, I moved heaven and earth to give it to her. Department A's requests always had to first go through a merciless BS filter, because I didn't want to be flimflammed as I had in the early days of my career. By sugarcoating everything, the chairperson undermined his and his department's credibility. The ability to form honest, working relationships based on trust is the key to leadership.

Once when I was department chair at Ohio State, the provost and I walked across campus together after a staggeringly dull committee meeting. "Why would you want to spend your days this way?" I asked her. She stopped, turned to

me, and answered my question seriously.

"Last week," she said, "I was walking across campus feeling sorry for myself and thinking about my scheduled committee meetings, the speech I had to give that evening to an alumni group, and the dozens of emails that had flooded my inbox since morning. Then I heard the sound of a single cello coming from an open window in the music building. I looked over and saw a student practicing her instrument. I had worked for weeks with her dean to put together the budget for the new cello program. As I listened to her practice, I realized she was pursuing her dream because of what I, an administrator she would probably never meet, had done, and that made me feel really good."

Those are the kinds of satisfactions that come with administrative accomplishments; good administrators rejoice in the successes of those they serve. If you can relate to that little story and see yourself in a similar role, I wish you the best of luck. We need more people like you.

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LETTERS

Broad academic experience is best

I am the chair of the physics department at St Mary's College of Maryland. Our program served as one of the case studies of best practices in the report¹ of the Joint Task Force on Undergraduate Physics Programs (J-TUPP), summarized by cochairs Laurie McNeil and Paula Heron in *PHYSICS TODAY* (November 2017, page 38). The report puts forward a productive vision for improving the career preparation of physics students and provides numerous recommendations, all well supported by research and by theory.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of that issue's editorial (page 8). The writer professes little enthusiasm for the US higher education system. In particular, he bemoans US universities' approach of providing a liberal education—that is, using a broad-based curriculum to expose students to a vari-

ety of approaches to understanding the world. The editorial substitutes anecdote for systematic evidence, provides personal opinion in place of research-based theory, and confuses some examples of poor implementation with fundamental flaws.

The writer advocates having students spend more time in their major or on a major-centered project instead of taking so-called general education courses. To see the weakness of those propositions, one can look to the evidence readily available in the career outcomes of students who graduate from the most extreme practitioners of the system that the column decries—US liberal arts colleges.

Broad, general studies in multiple fields are the primary hallmark of a liberal education. Liberal arts institutions educate a small fraction (3%) of the total US university student population. How-

ever, they produce eventual science doctoral students at twice the rate of other US universities.² Even on an absolute scale, liberal arts colleges are disproportionately overrepresented on lists of undergraduate programs that are top producers of science doctoral students in general and physics doctoral students in particular.³ Likewise, graduates of liberal arts colleges make up an even more disproportionately large fraction of National Academy of Sciences fellows² (19%) and Nobel Prize recipients⁴ (20%).

In the private sector, human resources departments may focus on specific technical skills when hiring students into their first job after graduation. Several recommendations from the J-TUPP report help address educational gaps there. However, a large majority of top management personnel think that a broad range of skills and knowledge are also important for long-term career success; 80% recommend that all college students acquire that knowledge through the liberal arts and sciences.⁵ Employers