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# Back to the Classroom After 11 Years in Administration



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By George Justice | SEPTEMBER 11, 2018

**I**n August, for the first time in 11 years, I began teaching a standard courseload for tenured professors at my university. I had a year to plan for that — plenty of time to mull the knotty question of how to make the classroom a central part of my worklife again.

Former administrators face practical and emotional complexities in returning to faculty positions, as [a report](#) in *The Chronicle* recently showed and as I have been [documenting](#) in my columns ever since I stepped down from my position as dean of humanities at Arizona State University.

A month into my post-administrative career, I can say that my back-to-the-classroom planning paid off in

some ways and not in others.

It certainly helped to be thinking about teaching and trying to plan in advance the kind of courses in which I could be most effective. In the months before I returned to the classroom, I spent time going over the departmental curriculum, imagining courses I could gear up for without extensive new preparation. I spoke with the associate chair for curriculum. I conferred with colleagues who teach in the same broad area. All of those things helped me handle the practical challenges. What I didn't prepare for effectively was the emotional impact of teaching re-entering my life at the center of things.

It's true that some faculty members, upon entering the rarefied world of academic administration, are happy to put teaching behind them. "Can you imagine returning to a 2-2 load?" a friend and excellent dean once asked me over a single-malt Scotch in the hotel bar at a conference. "All the papers to grade!" Meanwhile, on my campus, non-tenure-track instructors teach five courses a semester of freshman composition. Now *that's* a lot of papers to grade.

Former administrators who take up faculty roles again need always to keep in mind our privileged positions. That imposes a duty on us to excel in all aspects of the job. Even if the institution's budget model provides central salary funding, so that we're a "freebie" to our departments, our very presence means that there's less room for someone else in the discipline in our department, and so another graduate student will go without a job in a very crowded tenure-track market.

In my own transition back to the classroom, I considered all sorts of technical questions, major and minor: How should I handle course assignments? What subject matter did I want to teach? And at what level? What days of the week and times of the day? Those are technical matters that nevertheless have an impact on our effectiveness and pleasure in teaching. The single most important answer to those questions, as I only realized in retrospect: "Defer to the culture of the department."

Many deans tear out their hair at the voluntary nature of the way departments assign courses to faculty members. Many departments, particularly at research-oriented institutions, will send out a questionnaire asking, "What do you want to teach next year?" Progressive departments might change the word "want" to "plan," but in either case the import is the same: Faculty members decide what they want to teach. The end result isn't always the utilitarian dream of the greatest good to the greatest number of students.

That drove me crazy as a dean. Which is why, when I received the course-assignment survey, my first

response was "assign me to whatever the department needs." That caused problems rather than solving them, since it carried an implication that I was some kind of martyr (while my peers weren't). And of course if I didn't propose which courses I wanted to teach, someone in the departmental administration would have to do that work for me.

My next impulse was to declare that I only wanted to teach a highly specialized course in my field that I knew I would enjoy. I'm an expert, after all, in 18th-century British literature. Sign me up for that class, I said. It appears on the department's course roster but hasn't been taught much in the past few years. I received a polite request to propose another course — one that might actually attract students. Indeed, our area director had the temerity to suggest exactly which course in my broad field of expertise might work. I suppressed the urge to revolt and followed the advice.

I ended up with a schedule of two classes in the fall, and two in the spring. One of them each semester is a "service" course — I am currently teaching the sophomore survey of British literature, to 1800. Next semester I'll teach the second half, from 1800 to the present. Both courses are required for secondary education majors in English.

Each semester I'll also teach a junior-level course. Right now it's "Women and Literature: Jane Austen," which has attracted a brilliant set of students. And next semester, instead of the specialized course in 18th-century literature that data suggested would not attract a robust student population, I'll teach the history of the novel from its beginnings "to Jane Austen." Evidently putting her name in a course title tends to result in a fully enrolled class.

My institution allows faculty members to request teaching days and times. Here I made a mistake by requesting a teaching schedule that would require me to be there only on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Yes, it's great that I'm able to help with school transportation for my kids (at different schools this year) and yes, I have Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays to dig into research. But I've never taught 75-minute courses back-to-back, especially in classrooms so far apart that I need to walk very quickly after my first in order to be there on time for my second.

Remaining deeply attentive to students is proving challenging to me as the second class comes to a close. If I had really been thinking about students, let alone my own sanity, I would have given myself some time between classes. I might even — heaven forfend — have opted for the dreaded MWF schedule, giving me shorter class periods, albeit more of them.

However, there's a more important reason I wish hadn't bundled my courses in two mornings a week. I anticipated that full-time teaching would cause me anxiety, anger, and agony. Instead, I feel sheer joy, not only with the students but with the entire role of faculty member. I didn't anticipate that — at all — and I didn't feel or understand it until just before the first day of class meetings.

Trying to get us into the swing of things, the department chair held a faculty retreat. It felt surprisingly great to mingle with my colleagues, talk about the summer, and exchange ideas about teaching and research. Later that day I was in my not-yet-organized faculty office and I heard a knock at the door. It was a student in my junior-level class. It was her first day on the campus after transferring from a community college near her home. She was a new English major, and wanted to meet her professors before the semester began.

In that moment the combination of her interest in Jane Austen and her own life experience hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks. Like Jane Austen's main characters, she was a young person coming into the wider world, exercising her brain, learning, and starting her independent life. We talked about the class for a few minutes, and I told her I looked forward to seeing her the next day. As I closed the door behind her I began to weep.

I feel impossibly, almost miraculously, energized by the opportunity to share my knowledge and to learn from my students. They are brimming with ideas, they respect each other, and they are willing to give the material a try. I never thought it possible but I'm on campus, working hard, and not thinking much about my old job.

Others returning to full-time faculty roles may have been so sick of their administrative jobs that contemplating the classroom always provided a refuge from their professional misery. Some might still be feeling such anger and sadness from the close of their administrative careers that teaching feels like an alien activity even as they find themselves standing in front of a classroom of students. And unfortunately, there are some former administrators who never liked teaching anyway, and their role in the classroom feels like a punishment, to be endured in return for the nearly guaranteed salary provided by continuing tenure.

I'm still making adjustments but I have three pieces of advice for other administrators contemplating a



return to teaching:

- Get over yourself. Your students don't give a damn that you once thought you had an important administrative position. And there's no reason they should. They deserve your respect and best energy. To them you are a teacher — that's it.
- Try something new in your teaching. Do something — anything, really — to change up your courses, even ones you have successfully taught in the past. New readings, new assignments, different ways of organizing class structure. The effort might seem artificial at first, but unless you never should have been a professor in the first place, you'll become absorbed in what you're doing.
- Keep your opinions to yourself. Neither the department nor the college cares about your good ideas for the curriculum. I'll discuss service and the former administrator in my next column. I am still learning to take my own advice on this one.

*George Justice is a professor of English at Arizona State University and formerly the university's dean of humanities and associate vice president for arts and humanities.*

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