



## Considering the Dark Side of Administration

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As I write, it is fall in Athens, Georgia; and the semester is underway. New and returning students and re-energized professors bring excitement to the campus. From academic programs to the performing arts to athletics, the institution offers something for everyone. The late summer brought a new opportunity for me, as well. At the beginning of the academic term, the University of Georgia's (UGA) Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost departed to become president at one of the university system's comprehensive universities. The President asked me to serve as the Interim Provost for a second time (first time in 2013–14); so, taking a deep breath and with deep commitment to UGA—our faculty and students, I said yes. I was honored to work once again with a wide range of people and programs as we engage in research, instruction, and public service at the highest levels to fulfill our land grant mission.

Immediately I was asked by multiple friends and people whom I had just met the following question. “Why did you do this again?” Good question. The scope of responsibility is wide, the workload is heavy, the expectations are high, and challenges always exist. Plus, I was not aspiring to this job or any other, so there was no stepping stone advantage here! Well, this is puzzling, and I asked myself why I did say yes. My faculty position as the Zell Miller Distinguished Professor and director of the UGA Institute of Higher Education fits me just fine.

Within a month of accepting this interim assignment and while still mulling the question as to why I did do this, I was asked to provide a welcome at the new department head and directors workshop. The first panel focused on questions around standard administrative tasks of scheduling, budgeting, and evaluating peers. And, then suddenly, without missing a beat, the phrase “going to the dark side” was used. Everyone knowingly nodded and multiple participants, whether new to UGA or long-term faculty members, used the term.

This assertion puzzled me for days. In earlier years, I remember jokingly referring, like many others, to administration as the dark side. Had I returned to the dark side? What does the term mean? Does it refer to the administrative context, process, the administrator, like Darth Vader in the Star Wars trilogy, or other meanings? This term caused me to explore more deeply the “why” of returning.

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To the challenging question of why, I came to the following answer: it's the four P's—people, problems, possibilities, and pageantry. Every day, I am privileged to work with amazing, dedicated *people*: 18 deans, 5 vice presidents, and 8 vice/associate provosts and center and institute directors, plus, faculty leaders, heads of student organizations, and university or ad hoc committee chairs. Each person brings a unique style and priorities and complex *problems* (and not all problems are bad!) for discussion. Some conversations are issue awareness; others may need policy interpretation, political and historical context, funding, or brainstorming. Collectively we problem-solve, and we partner for the most effective outcomes around the givens of the situation.

We also envision new *possibilities*, and we set higher goals for schools and colleges in instruction, research, and public service. We use student outcomes and instructional and research benchmarks to identify our next big step. We dream together. Finally, we engage in the *pageantry* of traditional ceremonies and emerging celebrations—new faculty receptions, awards banquets, homecoming parades, commencement, and the annual spotlight on the arts festival. We celebrate because hard work deserves a moment of pause and recognition to mark the contributions of many and the achievements of all.

Our people—faculty, staff, and students—overwhelmingly lead and serve with dedication, excellence, and integrity. I said yes because I am honored to work at the University of Georgia with these people, to be a partner in problem-solving, exploring new possibilities, and participating in the pageantry of what makes this great public university essential to the society and makes the society necessary for the university. Do those lofty pronouncements diminish the quantity and stress of the work? No, but they do give it deep meaning and unreserved commitment to do my part.

So, in the end, I think of “going to the dark side” in two ways. First, darkness may be a behavior, especially if we prevent transparency, overlook equity, give power to concealment, fail to collaborate, and are primarily self-serving in our goals and actions. However, darkness may also be a space that connotes the unknown, the undiscovered, and the yet to be examined. Research seeks to explore the “darkness,” the ambiguous, the unstated, and the untried. Research tests hypotheses and gains evidence from trials and tests and from people.

I believe that exemplary administrative work can be compared to research: both are dedicated to collaborative investigation, to discovery, and to proposing new possibilities and explanations. Administrators willing to examine long-standing assumptions, to challenge well-established and dated institutional practices, and to interrogate unintended outcomes encourage innovation and creativity. Exemplary administrative practice encourages solutions to emerge from the dark corners of neglect to the light of public discussion and provisional implementation.

From the “outside” administrative darkness may be conceived of as blind adherence to current policies and practices that may be ill-fitted for the new inhabitants of our departments and majors. Administrative darkness may be an individual feeling of uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity, where the incumbent has too little experience and the support network is too shallow or nonexistent. The darkness may descend when “answers” are seen as individual expectations and actions rather than collective judgment.

I look forward to sharing with my junior colleagues that a walk on the alleged “dark side” can be positive and rewarding; administration is not a solo practice. Rather, when you genuinely reach out for help—to collaborate, to understand—someone will be standing in the light or ready to join you in the dark to see it through. Administration is an opportunity to learn and to collaborate and to serve a wide range of people, problems, possibilities and pageantry.

Administrators do not represent “a sinister dark side” when the values of the university serve daily as guiding principles.

So, I am honored to have said yes; it’s all about the people, and I hope to help bring light to areas that we have not yet explored to find new meaning and relevance in here-to-fore dark corners.

Note: For additional explanation of the dark side, see the following: Bengsten, S., & Barnett, R. (2017). Confronting the dark side of higher education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 51.114–131.