In 2004, I assumed an administrative role in my university, thus joining what is commonly referred to as the “Dark Side” of academia. I have only just returned to my position as a faculty member. Some pursue administration as a career path and expect to move up the academic ladder, progressing from department head, to dean, to provost, and, perhaps, even to president. Others, like myself, view administration as an intriguing experiment: I certainly didn’t anticipate staying away from a faculty role for so long (almost 13 years). Like many faculty, I had little experience with organizational leadership when I joined the Dark Side. I was like a Padawan apprentice (another reference from Star Wars) aspiring to be a Jedi and greatly in need of master Yoda’s training.

I share below what I have learned from my experience, not only for those considering a position in academic administration but also for others to gain an appreciation of this important role:

Administrators create an atmosphere that allows faculty members to exercise their dreams and accomplish their goals. This is accomplished by taking care of the day-to-day routine administrative tasks that ensure the smooth running of a department. As a former Dean told me, it is like “making sure there is toilet paper in the bathroom”.

The pace and workload that an administrator handles is unrelenting. E-mails, reports, budgets, and phone calls come in steadily. You will always have an internal list of things that must be done right away, projects to start, and projects that you should start. To be successful, an administrator needs to prioritize and to balance output versus perfection.

Administrators operate within an organizational unit. Life will no longer be as flexible as when you were a faculty member. You will have a supervisor to whom you will report on a regular basis. You, in turn, will supervise administrative and/or technical staff. You are held accountable for both the good and the bad of your unit.

As an administrator, you will develop a new network of relationships. This network will be invaluable when you are troubleshooting an unfamiliar problem, but it may also mean that you may have to work with people who drive you crazy. As Yoda would advise, “Patience you must have, my young Padawan.”

Administrators have to make decisions in a timely manner. You will need to address issues before they become emergencies by being in close touch with your faculty and staff. Results need to be communicated to all involved.

Administrators need to think “outside-of-the-box”. Just when you think you have seen it all, a new and strange problem appears that demands a unique solution. Being a troubleshooter and producing practical solutions is the most creative part of an administrative assignment.

Administrators are often expected to get deeply involved in conflict... not by instigating it (!) but by helping to resolve it.