*Talk delivered by Suzanne Kessler March 14, 2018 to the Purchase College community*

PARALLEL UNIVERSES: REFLECTIONS ON A CAREER TRANSITION

I had been a faculty member at Purchase for 31 years when, in 2004 I was asked by Tom and Gary Waller (then provost), to become Dean of Natural and Social Sciences. Being a college administrator had never been my plan, but I was flattered by the offer and felt like maybe it was time for a change, so I accepted with some trepidation and with the assurance that if I didn’t like it, I could go back to the faculty. The president asked only that I give it a try for 2 years. Fourteen years and one promotion to Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Vice Provost later, as I prepare to retire, I’ve been reflecting on my experiences being dean, particularly on some differences between being an administrator and being a faculty member. I suspect that many of these differences are not peculiar to Purchase.

Some years ago a former colleague, who had been a Vice President when I first became a Dean, reminded me that during my first few weeks as dean, I turned to her at one meeting and whispered, “Wouldn’t you really rather be discussing gender theory?” I didn’t recall that particular incident, but do recall feeling that nothing very important was going on at these seemingly interminable meetings. In fact, I remember telling people that first month or two that clearly the tension between the administration and the faculty was traceable to the fact that administrators must be jealous of faculty, who are engaged in the only meaningful activity one can do in an institution of higher education (perhaps the only meaningful activity *anyone* can do) --- help young people realize their potential by teaching them.

That same former colleague reminded me recently that I told her my goal was to improve college policies and procedures such that I would make the job of a dean dispensable. Clearly that hasn't happened. I can’t remember exactly when I stopped thinking that administrators are irrelevant, but that’s certainly a belief that was transformed within my first year as Dean.

There was a short period of time when I could see things with what I felt was tremendous clarity, simultaneously from the faculty and administrative points of view. I felt like the most astute anthropologist who saw both her home culture and the new culture without distortion. Insofar as that was true, this period lasted a micro-minute, and I soon saw the faculty through an administrative lens. Things that, as a faculty member, I had seen as legitimate complaints now seemed like gripes. What had changed?

As a faculty member I had assumed that administrators spent their days in some unknown and probably unimportant way – pushing papers (sending emails) and counting beans. There were certainly too many of them and they made too much money “off the sweat of our labor.” I didn’t think much about the administrative aspect of the college. It’s like the plumbing in your house: You don’t think about the pipes unless water starts seeping through your ceiling and you realize that pipes bring hot water to your shower head and you --- as a homeowner --- know nothing about how to fix the problem. Actually, as a homeowner and now an administrator I would say that maintaining and fixing the plumbing is much of what we do, with the help of many, many people in staff positions. And the plumbing is really important.

Not only do I now *see* the plumbing in the house, but I marvel at the work the pipes do. Students get recruited, get oriented to the college, and (mostly) enroll in the right courses taught by (mostly) the right faculty in (mostly) the right kind of room with (mostly) the right kind of technology and temperature. To continue with the metaphor: faculty don’t want to be, nor should they be, bothered by the mechanics needed to get the hot water to flow. Although they need to know what their part is in maintaining the (hot water) system (and administrators could do a better job of communicating this to them), their focus should mainly be on creating wonderful educational experiences for students.

The differences I’ve experienced sometimes make me feel that administrators and faculty live in parallel universes. Now I’m going to make some generalizations. Administrators look on the bright side. Although we sometimes see those in the other universe as misguided and naïve --- at best, and as lazy and obstinate --- at worst, we over-interpret the positive and over-value the actions of other administrators. In meetings we regularly hand out compliments to one another and, from our point of view, (almost) everyone is doing a terrific job and the college is getting better and better, minute by minute. An outside observer might ask: *Has this administrative initiative really been successful? Is the college really going to ride out the bad budgetary storm, emerging a stronger institution?* *Is the new dean really going to turn things around?* Because we administrators put a good spin on so many of our endeavors, it would prudent not to always trust our assessment of situations.

In contrast, I believe that faculty over-interpret the negative and tend to see the shortcomings of all actions and all actors. This is because we’ve been professionally trained as critics and are schooled in how to point out how things are inherently, inevitably, structurally flawed. (*All experiments are compromises; all findings are limited; all interpretations are only contextually real*.) Things could be better in theory, but only if everyone understood the system as we do. Anyone who thinks otherwise is misguided and naïve --- at best, and not smart or ill-motivated --- at worst. Because faculty put a critical spin on virtually everything those in the other universe (and even some in our own universe) do, we’re sometimes a downer to be with.

When I was a faculty member we often joked that faculty meetings were places that good ideas went to die. Conversely, I sometimes think of meetings with administrators as places where bad ideas go to get approved.  Both are clearly overgeneralizations, but you get the point about differences.

Some people have asked me what’s harder, being a teacher/scholar or being an administrator. I’d say that just as it’s hard to be a good teacher/scholar and easy to be a bad one, as it’s hard to be a good administrator and easy to be a bad one. This college has always been fortunate in having more committed, productive, ethical and hardworking faculty and administrators than detached, lazy, sleazy or misguided ones. Both teaching and administering get easier over time (thank goodness), but along with that comes the risk of becoming complacent or unimaginative.

If I put aside issues of who’s more virtuous or more compromised and focus my comparison on “enjoyment,” I would say I enjoyed almost everything about being a faculty member during the more than 30 years I did it. (Reading a set of bad papers was the only really negative part.) After 14 years as an administrator, I have to say that getting up in the morning and coming to Purchase five days a week and working with other administrators has also been enjoyable. This might be partly due to the fact that I spend so much more time with college staff than I did as a faculty member. College staff --- with only a few exceptions --- are cheerful, and this rubs off.

When you’re in one realm, it’s hard to imagine that other realms are as rewarding as they are. One of the reasons for that might be how different the lived experiences are. I’ll talk a little more about that now.

Time perspective: When I was a faculty member, the scope of my time perspective extended, at most, to the end of the academic year, and often just to the end of the week or even classroom period. My concern was primarily the learning outcome in that 100 minute period --- although I never, ever characterized it as a “learning outcome.” I could sometimes manage a broader perspective on particular advisees as I shepherded them through the four years, but I pretty much set my own pace for those 15 week units. Yes, there was Board of Study curriculum planning and there were faculty searches that required me to take a longer term perspective, but I’d characterize those kind of efforts as a minor part of my time as a faculty member.

As Dean, I think in two-year budget scenarios, three-year program initiatives, and four-year graduation rates. It’s important for me to sometimes engage faculty in this longer-range planning, but I recognize it’s not as natural for faculty to focus far into the future. As I’ve been winding down my time as dean, it’s been interesting to take part in conversations about a future I’ll not be part of. These last few months, in particular, I’ve been trying to focus on each remaining day, while every other administrator in the room is focused on fall 2018 and beyond.

Daily schedule: As a faculty member I set my own schedule, constrained only by the schedules of my psychology colleagues and the registrar’s slot options. As a dean my schedule is largely reactive. I start each day with my “need to do” list, but other people’s needs typically override mine. Only the most critical of my own items get addressed, and usually after 5:00 when most students, and faculty, and some administrators have moved on to other things. Winter and summer breaks are when I can do the work that explicitly addresses my annual work plans.

Working independently or in a system: It took me a couple of weeks after becoming a dean to realize that, unlike when I was a faculty member, not all the emails I was receiving required me to do anything.  Most of them were just “FYI.”  When I was a faculty member, I typically didn’t get copied on emails directed to other people. I take that to be an unobtrusive measure of the fact that I had a more independent existence. As a new administrator I frantically responded to everything until the realization hit. I was part of a community of people who need to know things. The corollary to this is that since I was part of a community, when I was faced with a problem, I didn't need to necessarily solve it myself.  I had many colleagues to bounce off each dilemma and crisis. This was a relief. Of course, when I was a faculty member I also had colleagues to help me deal with dilemmas and crises, but those dilemmas and crises were more occasional occurrences, not the bread and butter of everyday life. As an administrator being part of a system is a much more salient feature of day-to-day life. This is concretized in language. Administrators work with staff in *teams*, the word “team” implying an ongoing relationship. When faculty work together, it’s on taskforces or committees. I wonder if this is related to the fact we say someone is “on” the faculty as opposed to being “in” the administration.

Identity: When I switched from the faculty to administration, I was so naïve as to assume that I could retain my position in my former BOS at the same time I administered the school. I even retained my faculty office, somehow thinking I would divide my time between two offices as I switched tasks. I would do administrative work in my Social Science Building office and professorial work in my Natural Science Building office. I thought I could be an administrator *and* a faculty member. I had strong ties to the senior faculty and found it hard to imagine a change in those relationships. I didn’t have a theory about parallel universes. I also hadn’t predicted how my presence would hamper conversations, including on-line ones. Soon after I became Dean I was told that some junior faculty monitored themselves too much and some senior faculty were paranoid about my participation in face-to-face and on-line conversations. I removed myself from some group email lists because I was finding it too challenging to sustain two roles and perspectives simultaneously. By the way, once I became dean and moved into my administrative office I NEVER used my faculty office, but it took me about four years to appropriately abandon it so that it could be reassigned to a new faculty member. Change is hard, especially when it involves a change in identity.

More about Change

I’ve seen a lot of change in the years I’ve been at Purchase, and even a lot during the 14 years I’ve been a dean. I’m deliberately using the word “change” and the not the word “evolution.” Generally faculty don’t like change and administrators and staff not only accept it, but some seem to thrive on it ---- sometimes to the detriment of the institution. Presidents and Provosts are usually hired to *make* certain changes and they create their reputations, ones that they can use to market themselves for bigger jobs, on what they have been able to change. I would say that most of the things that Purchase provosts were charged with changing needed to be changed, but other changes seemed to have been introduced to build careers. When faculty sense that, they are understandably driven crazy.

Being a dean means managing the changes that provosts introduce. I had the experience of working for (yes “for” is a better word in most of those cases than “with”) six different provosts in 14 years. The first was in his last year when he and the president tapped me; the 2nd lasted three years; the 3rd was a one-year interim; the 4th lasted three years; the 5th was a two-year interim; and Barry in year five who has offered some welcome stability and sanity. This amount of change had not been healthy for the institution, and for me it was challenging to accommodate myself to the next personality and ideas for changes. One advantage of the turnover, though, was getting an inside view of different management styles and developing an appreciation for what makes a successful provost, a job which strikes me as the hardest one in the college. The president’s values and macro decisions direct the boat; the provost’s recommendations and everyday decisions actually move the boat – or not.

I was fortunate in having to deal with much less turnover among the LAS chairs. I worked with only two each in Humanities, Natural & Social Sciences, and Film & Media Studies. Louise Yelin, Ross Daly, Ronnie Halperin, Linda Bastone, Michelle Stewart and Agustin Zarzosa were, and are, a wonderful steadying influence on me. The chair’s job is underappreciated and undercompensated. When I put on my social psychology hat, I appreciate the power of the situation that drove six people with such wildly different temperaments to pull their hair out in identical ways. What bound us was an ability to laugh. I trust that none of our meetings were recorded.

Being the layer between provost and chair: The faculty review process as specified in our by-laws designates roles for the chair and the provost, but not the dean. At first I thought that would mean my being side-lined from perhaps the most important decisions a college can make --- whether to tenure and promote faculty. As it turned out, the absolute opposite was true. By not having a formal approval role, I was able to discuss each case with the chairs and help them craft an argument that met our goals. Similarly, each provost sought my counsel in interpreting the candidates’ files, the faculty committee recommendations, and the chairs’ recommendations, which as I said, I had a role in crafting.

When I moved from Dean of Natural & Social Sciences to Dean of LAS my role v.v. the faculty changed a bit. In general, a dean’s interactions with faculty are of three kinds: (1) trying to persuade faculty to do differently something they’ve done for many years; (2) listening to complaints about some way the college is being run by administrators; and (3) receiving requests for resources. I didn’t like it when I felt that my relationship with faculty mimicked parent and adolescent.

On the flip side, my interactions with administrators above me are, in some sense, a mirror image of my interactions with faculty: I try to persuade them not to do something they think is a good idea; I listen to their complaints about the faculty; and I ask for resources.

Students:

I haven't talked about students and the different ways that faculty and administrators think of them. To broadly generalize, some faculty think of students as their progeny and consider themselves most successful if they've been able to duplicate themselves, adding to another generation of PhD's. That doesn’t happen often, so another way we measure our success is the feeling that we’ve educated an emerging adult to think critically and value that kind of thinking. Working closely with students as advisors or thesis sponsors often produces that, but this isn’t something that’s easily demonstrated to others in what’s now called “formal assessment.”

Again broadly generalizing, the higher you are in the administration the more you’re likely to think of students as *enrollments* and define success as recruiting the right number of students, educating them in the right majors, and then graduating the right number from the college. One of the biggest dangers in being an administrator is losing touch with the fact that there are real people being educated. Having been on both sides, I can testify that it’s much more personally gratifying to feel like you’ve been successful with a person than that you met a target enrollment goal.

Advice: I don’t know whether to be slightly embarrassed or slightly proud to say that I’ve never read a book on how to be a manager. I’ve never attended a workshop, conference, or watched a webinar on how to manage. For better or worse, I followed my instincts. Without any formal education in these areas, I’ve learned a great deal about academic management and training, most of which boils down to: It involves lots of balancing:

First: Balance your outrage. I think it’s a helpful temperament to not make mountains out of molehills and to help others operate similarly. “Yes, the bureaucracy is maddening, but no one died because of it.” On the other hand, I’ve occasionally worried that my temperament has kept me from recognizing bad molehills. An institution/society benefits from having some people who get outraged more easily than I do. My experience, both as a faculty member and working with faculty, is that faculty get more easily outraged than administrators. It may be that administration self-selects for the more temperamentally accepting personality, but it also may be that the less individualistic nature of administrative work stirs up less outrage.

Second: Balance your ego. For many years I took a lesson from a Hasidic teaching and carried around two slips of paper in my pocket or purse. One said “You are the reason the universe was created.” The other said, “You are nothing but ashes and dust.” It helped me maintain equilibrium, as I bounced from one standpoint to the other --- sometimes within the same few hours. Every decision I make, every interaction I have is of critical importance. Nothing I decide or do has lasting relevance, so lighten up.

It’s possible to create effective working relationships by allowing others to feel good about themselves at your expense. I’ve had colleagues (sometimes whole departments of colleagues) who seem to feel best when they catch me making an error. When that happened, I tried to put my ego aside and not engage in who’s right or wrong. By accepting their interpretation of wrong doing, we move on. Again, I’m temperamentally well-suited to doing that; it would be harder for others.

The system we all work in benefits from the fact that neither as a faculty member nor as an administrator, are you likely to get much negative feedback about yourself. With few exceptions, people don’t really like to tell you to your face what you’re doing wrong. This certainly helps in balancing your ego.

Third: Balance your communication life. I’ve tried not to read work emails after I got home in the evening and definitely didn’t send any emails between midnight and 6:00 am. I’ve read ones written then; they RARELY reflect well on the writer. Also, I made it a practice not to answer negative communications. I’m not sure the sender realizes that they’ve been “snubbed,” but the main advantage to me is that I can hit delete and the email is not only out of my inbox but, given the way I’m psychologically built (being a denier not an obsessor) it really goes out of my head. I’m reminded of what a former colleague used to say, “Feed positivity and starve negativity.” Because I essentially have a built-in amnesia for negative interactions, I can be an unreliable narrator of the past.

If I were to wish one magic power on everyone who works in an organization, it would be the ability to recognize people who carry around a lot of pain. If you can’t help alleviate it, which most of us can’t, then limit the amount of time you spend around those people. I believe I’ve been able to feel some people’s toxicity, and insofar as I could, I tried to limit my exposure.

There are people --- faculty, staff, administrators, and even occasionally students and their parents --- who create drama. There’s a subset who after creating the drama swoop down and create a solution to the non-problem they originally created. In regard to of all these people, my strategy has been to not respond. Because the drama creation rarely happens in person, this means no email response from me. I allow them to have the last word, knowing that it’s the “last word” because I’ve decided not to feed the fire. Drama creators thrive on engagement, so starving the interaction has been my mainly successful solution.

In contrast to the drama-creators, some people are disruptive by being minimal responders. They don’t respond to email, don’t return phone calls, or don’t do what they agreed to do in face-to-face meetings. I often treated this as an opportunity to jump into the vacuum they created. I might begin an email to them (copying others if I can) with: “Having not heard from you regarding X, I decided to do the following.” It’s served me well to assume that as annoying as some people are, they are doing their best. So imagine if they weren’t – how bad it would be!

Fourth: Balance your tolerance for disorder. When I was in grade school, our school librarian didn’t allow us to take books off the shelves because she believed that they would never be returned to their right place on the shelves. Consequently, all we were allowed to do was sit at tables and stare at the books around us. She clearly had too low a tolerance for disorder, and I knew at the time that her rules for operating were not just peculiar but defeating. Student and faculty needs are messy. Their lives are messy and some of that mess is going to bleed into the operation of an institution. I often joked that I could do my work if only the college didn’t have so many faculty and students.

Fifth: Balance your caring.

I can trace most of my limitations as an administrator to my long history on the faculty and caring too much about certain people. It’s difficult to make the kind of changes that would sometimes benefit an institution when that means telling people you’ve known for decades and really like that they have to do something differently – something they may not be comfortable with. Having relationships is rewarding, but those relationships make the job hard. Obviously, this is why outsiders are brought into an institution, and why they succeed in ways that an insider can’t. Conversely, I’ve occasionally drawn on those same close long-term relationships to effectuate some changes. It’s satisfying to capitalize on the good will generated by knowing one another well – knowing both one another’s strengths and weaknesses.

That’s all the advice I’ll give about balancing. Advice can only take you so far. Luck plays a critical role, and you can’t control that. In my case luck came in the form of my colleague, Rich Nassisi. I am 100% positive that I could not and would not have stayed in my job or been successful to whatever extent I was if I hadn’t worked with him. Most people praise Rich for his store of accurate information about school policies and procedures. He has always been the go-to guy when you have a question. But more important than that, to risk overusing a phrase, he’s been the college’s *moral compass*, and my work as dean has benefitted from that.

Regrets:

I have lots of little ones, but two major ones that I’ll share. I regret that under my watch, bureaucracy at the college increased drastically. Being a scientist, I understand that correlation isn’t causation, so I don’t take responsibility for the upsurge, but I was unable to stop it and doubt that a new dean will be any more successful in reducing bureaucracy.

My second regret is that Purchase is still primarily known as an arts college and my attempt to raise the visibility of The School of Liberal Arts and Sciences outside the college has only been moderately successful. I chipped away at the narrow view of Purchase with the help of others, but there’s much more that can be done, something I hope a new dean will continue to work on.

In conclusion:

When I started at Purchase in 1972, Wendy and I were doing a lot of thinking and writing about gender --- specifically about the foundational beliefs that produce the gendered world we live in and the shift in perspective that could produce a differently gendered world. At this point in my career --- in this last semester of a life lived semester-by-semester since the age of 4 --- I find myself thinking again about foundational beliefs and perspective shifting, but this time about faculty and administrators. I find myself wondering if it’s possible to construct a more shared world, despite all the differences in perspective I’ve spent the last 30 minutes outlining. I leave you with a question: Can we bracket the suspicion created by living in two different universes and draw upon good-will and a common purpose? My warm feelings toward so many of you --- faculty, administrators, and staff ---- tell me that the answer could be "yes."