



Reflections of a New Administrator: A Letter to Myself

By Amy Cook, ESOL Program Director, Bowling Green State University

Dear Amy,

Just a few years ago, you never would have expected to be doing what you're doing today: directing the ESOL program.¹ And yet, whether it's what you expected or not, here you are, trying to do it well. Now that it's been a year, you ought to take some time to pause and reflect.

When people ask you how it's going, you often answer, "I'm learning a lot." This is certainly honest, but it's also a way to positively reframe some of the things you find most challenging about this role. You've always seen yourself as a life-long learner, and this position has provided you with plentiful opportunities to learn new things. In fact, you often feel like you don't know what you're doing (an uncomfortable feeling; a type of impostor syndrome, most likely). This means you ask a million questions as you try to navigate these new responsibilities as well as the challenges and unanticipated issues that arise on a regular basis. Much of what you now do day-to-day is solve problems and make decisions—both of which can wear you down. Sometimes you feel the decision fatigue most at the end of the day, when figuring out what to cook for dinner suddenly seems like an insurmountable task. At other times, the challenge is knowing that a problem exists, but feeling like you don't even know where to start to solve it. Or the sense that you mostly know about what's going wrong, and not the positive things that must be happening out there among the teachers and students. You've tried, too, to find time for some intentional learning in terms of your own professional development: reading books and articles about leadership and language program administration and asking colleagues who also serve/have served in administrative roles for advice. And as a firm believer in the value of reflective teaching practices, you've spent a lot of time reflecting on your experiences as an administrator in an effort to learn as you go along. You think a lot about how this role is changing you—pushing you beyond your comfort zone, affecting the way you think about things, and even altering your sense of who you are and who you want to be. You've reflected on the program itself, learning much more than you used to know about its history and the reasons we have done things the way we do, leading you to question some of those approaches and whether they're still appropriate given who we are and how we fit into the department today.

¹ Our ESOL program serves matriculated undergraduate and graduate students, providing additional language support in a combination of writing and speaking/listening classes as well as screening and classes for international teaching assistants. We're housed in the English Department, the largest department in the College of Arts & Sciences; I report to our Department Chair. ESOL faculty, all NTTF, are governed by the university's collective bargaining agreement and the English department's charter. Our campus has a separate office of International Programs and Partnerships which handles international student recruitment and visa paperwork, among other things. In this context, as program director, my role is quite different from those in other contexts, like IEPs.

This constant process of learning and reflecting has helped you to identify some of your own strengths and how they apply in this role. You're very organized and conscientious; people can count on you and your word. You work hard to keep procedures consistent and systematic and to document your work for the sake of continuity when program leadership changes in the future. You seem to be doing well at setting some boundaries, helping to avoid serious struggles with burnout so far. And you certainly care about what you do, though it's harder, sometimes, to see the impact. One of your favorite things about this role is that it allows you to share professional development resources and opportunities with your faculty colleagues. Also, since your days are often less heavily scheduled, you've made a conscious effort to take advantage of professional opportunities you would have opted out of when you had a packed teaching schedule. Some of these are clearly relevant to your role as program director; others have been helpful in keeping a stronger connection to your identity and expertise as a teacher—something you don't want to diminish during this season of your life.

On the other hand, there are several areas you should work toward improving. A few of these challenges are mundane, like the daily battles we all face with prioritizing and investing time where it's most needed. It's all too easy to spend an entire day reading and answering emails and not address the more important areas that need attention. You also find yourself getting stuck on follow through. It might be something that you forget about until you're reminded by our program secretary or an inquiry from a faculty member or student. Other times, it's initiatives or tasks that seem to get stuck waiting for input or approval from others. You struggle to know how frequently to raise these ongoing initiatives: you realize everyone is juggling many responsibilities, including priorities of their own, and you don't want to pester them or distract from things that might be more important. Yet, you don't want your issues to go unnoticed and unresolved simply for lack of reminding someone with the power to keep them moving. On the other hand, you sometimes struggle to be proactive in your own approach to taking on the challenges you know about. That is, you occasionally find yourself procrastinating, especially when there's a difficult decision to be made or a problem that you don't quite know how to solve (or even where to start). Sometimes you let yourself stall out: keeping busy with other things (email!) instead of forcing yourself to deal with the more important, but complex or intimidating, needs.

On a relational level, you have a lot of growing to do. You tend to be task-oriented, very focused on checking things off your to-do list and working efficiently. Sometimes, this makes you overlook the human element in the process of getting things done; you might stop by someone's office and jump right into asking work questions without thinking to engage them first as a human being, as a colleague. Another component of the role that's been challenging is supervising Graduate Assistants (GAs)—it's a totally different type of relationship; they're not your students or your colleagues, exactly. You want to create a work space that has clear expectations, helping the grad students to keep a balance between their duties for the GAship and their other responsibilities as students and outside of school. At the same time, our program counts on their labor, and you want to make sure they're working hard and efficiently. Thus, you need to find ways to keep them accountable for their tasks/projects, while also providing a work environment with some autonomy. Certainly, you want to show your respect for them as students, scholars, and colleagues, but you realize there's also a power-dynamic involved: you're their supervisor, and you need to ensure there's follow through and productivity in their work. It's hard to strike the right balance, and it's an ongoing challenge:

each time the program gets a new GA, you have to learn to work well with their personality and preferences.

Beyond considering how to learn from and resolve these challenges, you also find yourself reflecting on what you miss, including, most of all, the teaching. You're fortunate to teach 2-3 classes a year, so you're still active in the classroom, with an outlet for applying new teaching ideas and the ability to stay connected to students and our curriculum through firsthand experience. But still, you used to teach 8 classes a year, and you miss those additional opportunities to plan lessons, spend time in the classroom, and interact with students. You miss the predictable, if busy, MWF and TR teaching day routines and the energy that students bring to your life. Your colleagues might not believe it, but you even miss the grading! Sitting down for a morning or afternoon and poring over the evidence of student progress and learning can be so rewarding. You miss the sense of control you had over your schedule: the ability to plan ahead when a busy stretch or out-of-town conference loomed on the horizon. Now, many of the things you spend your days doing are those that you can't possibly work ahead on: they arrive in your inbox or appear at your office door. Embracing this unpredictability is a challenge for you.

You miss the sense of comradery with faculty colleagues. While you don't see yourself as "the boss," being the director changes your relationships with colleagues, in ways you're still trying to understand. Your teaching peers share knowing gestures and comments in the halls during those key moments of the semester: the solidarity of surviving the giant batches of grading; the responding to student questions; the countdown of weeks left in the semester. Of course, you still hear those conversations, but now you feel on the edges; you can relate, but only to some extent, because the nature of most of your work is different now. You don't want to falsely identify with the struggles of those teaching full loads...your work isn't the same. The other side of that coin is that you feel like you can't easily share your own struggles, insecurities, worries, or challenges, at least not in the same way, because these colleagues also can't fully empathize (and you don't want to project a negative idea of program leadership to those who might be called upon to lead in the future!).

You miss the rhythm of the semester, which you had just finally started to accept and experience with less guilt and frustration: the knowledge that some days/weeks would be more intense (with grading, planning, conferencing, etc.), but also the promise that some less demanding days/weeks would be around the corner. You miss the closure that the end of the semester provided, when you would spend some time reflecting on the recently finished semester and gathering some ideas for the one to come, but there was a very clear sense of completion: the semester was over, and you had a break to use however you decided. For now, perhaps it's enough to be reminded of some things you can look forward to when you return to full-time teaching someday.

In the meantime, try to think more about what you've gained: most of all, the chance to continue your own learning and professional development through this service to your program. You're developing new skills; and learning about the work that takes place behind the scenes in your program and in the department as a whole, to keep things running; and increasing your investment in the big picture—not only in your program, but in the department, college, and university.

And while your relationships with teaching colleagues have changed a bit, you've also gained closer connections with the department staff and administrators. Instead of students, these are the people you're most likely to interact with on a given day, and you've learned so much from them. Not only that, but you've established connections with people all across campus as you communicate with other departments, making you feel more integrated in the larger university community than you've ever been before.

Having an administrative position has also given you so much more appreciation for the varied, challenging, and relentless work done by staff and administrators. You have a better understanding of how and why things get done (or don't), and more empathy for those behind the scenes or in leadership positions and the many priorities and stakeholders they manage on a daily basis. Hopefully, this perspective will enable you to respond to these colleagues with more grace and kindness, especially when things don't go your way.

It's a lot to process, but as you think back on the last year, you should also keep your eye on the future, in order to build on what you've learned and do your job better, but in the same spirit of learning and growth, working to address your weaknesses and trust your strengths. Find ways to interact more productively and personally with those around you, and also enable them to do their best work, in a climate that fosters trust, collaboration, and professional development. It won't be easy, but you're not alone, and it's work worth doing well. Hang in there...and remember to enjoy the journey!

AMY COOK has been the Director of the English for Speakers of Other Languages Program at Bowling Green State University since summer 2016. She also teaches ESOL, first-year writing, and TESOL certificate classes. Outside of teaching, Amy is interested in cooking, baking, reading, and travel.



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