Women in the Academy

Learning From Our Diverse Career Pathways

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In higher education you can be a leader in a number of different domains: your department, your college, your university, your disciplinary field, and your community. I've been involved in all of them, and so can you.

My career started as a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). I am a social psychologist who studies issues related to children, psychology, and law. I've always balanced a love of research with a love of teaching and student mentoring as well as a desire to give back to my institution and my field through service and leadership. My leadership roles have included director of undergraduate studies and associate chairperson in the department of psychology, assistant and associate dean in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, vice provost for undergraduate affairs, and dean of the Honors College in the university. I have also served as president of the Society for Child and Family Policy and Practice (Division 37) and the society's Section on Child Maltreatment in the American Psychological Association, as a member of the Chicago Children's Advocacy Center Board, and as founding executive director of the Chicago Collaborative for Undergraduate Success in my community.

I hope that writing about my pathway to and through my professional life will help you find and follow your own pathway as a leader. My thoughts have been shaped by Nichola Gutgold's inspirational chapter, a new memoir by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand aimed at getting women "off the sidelines and into the game" of politics, research on gender and leadership, my memories of the first feminist-themed memoir collection I
ever read *Divided Lives*, especially Meredith Vieira’s frank chapter therein, and of course, by advice from many wonderful friends and mentors, without whose wise counsel I would not be where I am today.

**THE BEGINNING OF MY PATH**

So, from the beginning: I was born in 1964 and grew up an only child on a farm in southern Virginia, about halfway between Richmond and Raleigh and about halfway between the mountains and the Atlantic. The farm has been in my mother’s family for over one hundred twenty years. It had the range of activities typical to that area of the country: a giant garden, beef cows, hay to feed the cows, tobacco, and hit-or-miss attempts to raise things ranging from soy beans to corn to weird hybrids called Sudex and Milo. Or maybe Milo is a naturally occurring species, but I am not going to stop writing to Google it. I am thankful that I grew up on that beautiful land.

I attended elementary school at tiny South Hill Academy and high school at even tinier Kenston Forest School. I received an impeccably strong but basic and naively sheltered education. I was taught that the Civil War had nothing to do with slaves, and I don’t recall learning about the Holocaust until I was in college. It was not until I was twenty-eight years old, developing our psychology department’s first graduate class on prejudice and racism, that I read the US Supreme Court decisions documenting the fact that my beloved home state of Virginia was the national leader in resistance to *Brown v. Board of Education*, literally shutting down some of its public schools rather than desegregating, and finally producing a set of private, all-white alternatives like South Hill Academy and Kenston Forest. Publicly, people usually attempted to justify it as the only way to get a “quality” education for their children, but many didn’t bother to hide the real reason. It was the 1960s and 1970s in the South, and there were still two waiting rooms in doctors’ offices.

How did I get from there to here? There’s no simple answer, only sets of circumstances, chance experiences, and my curiosity about what else might be out there. I inherited some basic smarts and appreciation for education from my mother’s strong side of the family, Germans who immigrated in the late 1800s from war-torn Prussia. My great-grandfather, Herman Otto Paul Paetz, landed in New York City, married Maria Dukek, and, so the story goes, saw an ad in the paper for land in southern Virginia for $1 an acre. So the Paetzes, the Leindeckers, the Heinrichs, and so on moved south to become tobacco farmers. Paul and Maria had three sons (Herman, Otto, and Paul) and two daughters (Katie and Clara, my grandmother). It was an exotic story to me and encouraged my belief that the world was much bigger than the rural area I saw. This idea was reinforced by much reading from an early age, encouraged by my moth-
me valuable lessons in how to be a leader in one’s field, and I still rely on her for advice and marvel at how her career never ceases to expand.

I finished my doctorate when I was twenty-eight and became assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), a huge public "Research 1" institution, one of the top ten most diverse nationally, with fifteen colleges and an urban mission supporting its student body of over twenty-seven thousand undergraduate and graduate students. It was a dream job, having a strong psychology department with excellent laboratory resources, staff, one hundred graduate students, and more than a thousand undergraduate majors, and around thirty faculty, including Shari Diamond, a leader in my field. UIC provided support for my research on the accuracy of children’s eyewitness testimony and ways to interview children who are suspected abuse victims, and jurors’ reactions to cases involving child witnesses. UIC even gave me a husband: in my second year the department hired a cognitive psychologist, Gary Raney, and we fell in love, which was very convenient given how difficult it is to squeeze dating in when you’re a hard-working assistant professor. Gary is truly still my steady rock throughout everything I face.

ADMINISTRATIVE ROLES

My first administrative appointment came the year I was being considered for tenure, when I was thirty-three. My department chair, Alex Rosen, asked me to be his associate chair. It was the first time anyone specifically pointed out my administrative potential. This role suited my sense of civic responsibility and gave me a productive outlet for my impatience with problems and inefficiencies. I began to understand the business of the university, especially space assignment, a point of contention with the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, which failed to understand the psychology department’s need for laboratories. I made an effective case, setting in motion changes that still benefit the department today. This also set in motion Dean Stanley Fish’s belief that he might rather have me on “his side.” So after two years as associate chair, I was offered an assistant deanship for the year which led to an associate dean position for two additional years.

It’s worth pausing here to consider my decision to accept the associate dean position when I was only just tenured. Some advised me to wait until becoming full professor before taking on administration, for the added respect and to ensure that the burden of administrative work would not threaten my research productivity and therefore my future promotion. I have seen associate professors’ promotions derailed by associate deanships. No one ever got promoted for service—those asking you to do service will turn right around and vote against your promotion later if you do not have enough publications. And if you say no, they will forget immediately and move to the next person on their list. So, if such a decision comes your way, think very carefully, know yourself very well. I knew it was the right timing for me, because although I liked research and teaching, I felt a little like I was in a rut. Many people feel this after getting tenure—you’ve been so focused on clearing that hurdle for so long, that once you do, there is a natural tendency to wonder “now what?” I needed to try something new, especially given the opportunity to work with this particular dean, who was an academic celebrity of sorts, very talented, and as it turned out, very good to me. So I took the position, knowing that although it was technically 50 percent time, I was committing to two full-time jobs: associate professor and administrator.

I liked being in the associate dean position where I could solve problems, make changes that helped others, and work in a team with other administrators and faculty. I liked the way accomplishments became tangible far more rapidly than the sometimes glacial pace of research. I learned a great deal about how a university really runs. I also learned many “procedural” skills: how to set a meeting’s firm agenda and run it tightly; how to listen carefully and distinguish among competing concerns to find good solutions to problems; how to organize and launch an initiative; and how to assemble the right teams for various projects.

At the time, I was only the second or third woman to have ever been in the office. I felt at ease with the dean and the three male associate deans, but immediately saw their unease being around a woman. The ice was broken one day shortly after I began the job: a bit of a crisis emerged on our campus. I was well-placed as a social scientist to help manage it for our college, which made the others grateful. But their real relief came when, at our first staff meeting after the crisis happened, the dean asked me for a translation of what had happened. I said simply, “We’re fucked.” For some of the right and wrong reasons, this gave me all the credibility I needed to work effectively with these men. This is changing, but some men are simply scared of women—of the stereotype that we are too quick to take offense, too quick to sue them for a joke or a compliment. This is often completely inaccurate, but sometimes it is true, and I have seen it hurt some women’s chances of getting administrative positions. Some of my non-stereotypical traits put the men around me at ease. A bottle of bourbon in my bottom drawer bought me important minutes of quality time with the dean at the end of some long days, just as sports knowledge and participation might have, had I had any interest in them. I’m also 6’1” in heels, which gives me the advantage of rarely having to look up to a man. I’m not suggesting that women all need to swear and drink bourbon to become administrators, but I am saying that some of my characteristics, familiar to men, put my supervisors at ease and allowed me to move more freely than other women might have. Find human commonalities that will make your working relationships more comfortable and therefore your work easier.
I stayed in college administration three years, taking a sabbatical leave for another year in the middle, thanks to the dean’s genuine concern about my career. He, as well as both provosts we worked with, Betsy Hoffman and Toby Tate, and the chancellor, Sylvia Manning, all impressed upon me the necessity of gaining promotion to full professor to have the most successful career. They helped me find the drive to become one of the quickest at that time in our department to be promoted from associate to full professor. It took very long hours and the well-timed sabbatical in Savannah, Georgia, where my husband and I wrote all day overlooking a beautiful tidal marsh. It also took support from the university that you should look for if you take an administrative position. For me, this was a half-time graduate research assistant and an additional course buy out each year I was associate dean. I maintained my research laboratory and primary mentorship of three or four graduate students the entire time and have ever since. I cannot speak for all disciplines or your work style, but for me as a research psychologist, the key was to have many projects going at once in collaboration with my students. Above all, remember this: you will never get promoted at a research institution for anything other than the lines on your CV under the word “publications” and, increasingly, under “grants”—not good teaching, not service, not administration. So if you do not think you can essentially do two jobs at once, don’t take an administrative post until you are full professor.

One other note: no one seems to care much about mentoring associate professors to reach full professor rank. Women in particular are slow to be promoted. After jumping through the fiery hoop of tenure, there’s a natural tendency to want to relax a little. Fight it. There’s a second fiery hoop left, and you have to clear it, or a thousand doors will always be closed to you, in and out of administration. You can do it—it is no more than what you did the first time (i.e., finishing your dissertation) and the second time (i.e., getting tenure). In fact, it will be easier this time, because now you actually know what you’re doing. It’s hard, but it sure ain’t diggin’ ditches. Work hard, take excellent graduate and undergraduate research assistants, and teach classes that don’t require loads of preparation. And if you have anxiety and self-doubt, fight that, too. Academia is a breeding ground for it, rewarding the bad behaviors of tearing others’ intellectual merit down to promote one’s own. If there is one thing I could change about my career, it would be to have let go of the anxiety and self-doubt along the way. So, be confident that you are every bit as good as those who simply seem to have more self-confidence and self-promotional skills. Then learn from them and promote your work, because the single most important thing for promotion is your scholarship, but the second most important thing is what your outside referees write in their letters about you. Meet the people in your field, have coffee or drinks at conferences, maintain a little e-mail correspondence—these give you a chance to get to know and learn from them, it gives them a chance to get to know you and the quality of your work, and they will remember you (even if you don’t have such a memorable name as mine). These relationships will also result in more invitations to contribute to edited books, working conferences in Europe, the benefit of the doubt when journal editors consider disparate reviews of your work, and so forth.

Being tenured and promoted to full professor and maintaining your scholarly work are critically important if you decide to leave your administrative post or if politics backfire and you’re asked to leave. If you give up your scholarship, you give up your largest source of respect, strength, and courage. I’ve never been afraid to get fired, and any administrator who is, is compromised—at risk for making decisions to save his or her tail rather than decisions that are moral and best for the university’s students and faculty. Throughout all of my administrative posts, I have never left the faculty role, continuing my research and student mentoring. Some of the best moments of my professional life have been seeing my students’ accomplishments and making discoveries in my field.

I left the associate deanship when I did for a couple of reasons. First, I knew that my bid for full professor the following year would be perceived as “cleaner” if I were solidly back among the faculty. Second, there’s an expiration date to every administrative position. Sylvia Manning, then UIC’s chancellor, once told me she thought administrators needed a year or two to learn how to do the job, one or two to do it right, and one or two to get tired of it (or something like that). That trajectory is accurate: I felt I had learned a lot and accomplished a lot, but I didn’t think I would gain significantly more knowledge or experience in that role that would help or inform my future career. It’s really important to know when to leave a position. Overstaying your welcome is not good for the institution nor for you. If the challenge and excitement of the position are gone, or you’ve lost the support you need to do your best work, or personal circumstances lead you toward other goals, move on.

Around being promoted to full professor, when I was forty, I took on several other formative leadership positions including the department’s director of undergraduate studies and membership on the university-wide Promotion and Tenure committee, as well as roles outside of the university, including chairing committees in the APA’s American Psychology-Law Society and serving as president of APA’s Society for Child and Youth Policy and Practice, and its Section on Child Maltreatment. The latter were particularly rewarding because of the opportunities to accomplish much of practical value by translating research into public policy aimed at improving the lives of children and their families. Those roles taught me how to manage an organization and ensure that members were well-positioned to lead various initiatives. I should also mention that, years earlier as an assistant professor, I also had service roles in my community related to my research. With a local child advocate and an
work caught the attention of some very important and powerful people outside the university. And therein lies one of the greatest lessons I learned in administration—how to look outward and engage an entire community in collective action to accomplish a shared goal, rather than operate in an insular manner. A brilliant (anonymous) foundation granted us $400,000 to fund our analyses if we would “think bigger.” So with much face-to-face networking, I founded the Chicago Collaborative for Undergraduate Success, bringing every major non-profit university in the city of Chicago together to tackle the national shame of low graduation rates by working with each other and with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), sharing data, and developing evidence-driven initiatives. For example, with the original grant and another from the McCormick Foundation, we will, for the first time, give CPS detailed information about how their students do once they get to college, data that CPS can use to better prepare students for college and data that the universities can use to better support CPS students on their campuses. Many funders are watching our work carefully and are poised to strengthen the collaborative. Yet as I write this, I do not know if the collaborative will actually fulfill its great promise of bettering the lives of thousands of low-income students in Chicago. There has been leadership change at our university and, with it, a different agenda. And here’s the most disappointing thing one encounters in administration: you have an important initiative, you get the right people on board, you get external funding, the greater community gets excited, you start to get results that improve the lives of thousands of students, but, alas, leaders might fail to see the importance of your project, or they hijack your project, or they politicize your project, or they want to move in a different direction. And then the party’s over.

Now I am in my seventh year of being dean of the Honors College, a wonderful post that has allowed me to work with the wonderful faculty, staff, and students to build substantially upon the strengths I found when I arrived. I’ve been able to increase the budget significantly and, therefore, grow, strengthen, and diversify the college in terms of its students, staff, faculty, programs, curriculum, scholarships, and so forth. I’ve worked every day as dean to instill in the UIC Honors College the values and experiences that I knew as an undergraduate at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College. I’ve fostered egalitarian rather than elitist honors education. The reward has been watching wave after wave of students come through, build their successful pathways, graduate (at a remarkable rate of 88 percent in a university with a rate of 60 percent), and leave to fulfill their promise in life. While dean, I also cultivated key leadership roles nationally, working with other honors deans from the Big 10 to found a new national conference called Honors Education in Research Universities. This brought me the pleasure of meeting our editor, Nichola Gutgold. It is very important to look outward in any administrative role, becoming active in the national organizations. It will bring you more
leadership opportunities and great ideas that will help on your own campus and nationally.

LESSONS LEARNED

What’s missing from my chapter and probably from others in this book? A lot. Luckily, most of my experiences as a leader in academe have been positive, involving people who are reasonable and kind, and problems that are solvable with logic, data, and careful analysis. But not all, and the details of those experiences are missing, just as they are probably missing from Senator Gillibrand’s book, and many others. Perhaps you can imagine some of those experiences when I tell you that since I began my last post over six years ago, Illinois was dead last in the entire nation on some lists for state funding of education (imagine the budget cutting exercises I have been through), and our university has had five presidents, four provosts, and three chancellors—with the last chancellor drawing a vote of no confidence from our faculty in late 2014 after she fired my boss from the provost role (he’s now provost elsewhere) and me from the vice provost role (but not the dean role). We were having a lot of success leading undergraduate initiatives and, therefore, challenging the status quo. Not being able to write candidly about such trying experiences is unfortunate because I think it would be helpful to others. But it’s not possible for anyone to write about the really difficult situations in any detail. They involve real people who are often still in the lives of the authors, and they involve authors who probably aren’t yet done with their careers, and they sometimes involve legal agreements that preclude discussion. Perhaps such discussions exist in books I have not read; I do recall one exception, Meredith Vieira’s chapter in Divided Lives, where she candidly and bravely spoke about the astonishing sexism she encountered on the set of 60 Minutes.

So, sometimes the best laid plans and your best efforts will be thwarted by others. It’s just business: pick yourself up and move on. Cultivate excellent mentors who will tell you in confidence the things that cannot be discussed in a chapter like this when you encounter such rough spots. Meanwhile, below are a few other things I’ve learned along the way. Advice is not one-size-fits-all, so you’ll have to decide whether what worked for me will work for you. Build on the advice of others, but always trust your well-informed gut. In the end, you have to answer only to yourself.

- Self-Confidence: don’t let fear or self-doubt keep you from taking an administrative position. You’ll gain the experience you need on the job, including potentially intimidating things like budgeting (it’s really just adding and subtracting). If you are offered an administrative position, it is because you have the basic skills of good judgment and decision making that transcend the particular setting or task (such as where to add or subtract dollars in a budget). Once in a position, don’t let fear of making mistakes keep you from acting, and acting confidently. Mistakes come with any territory characterized by fast and decisive action when all variables cannot be known, which is the definition of many administrative situations. If you are moral, transparent, and listen well, your mistakes will not be consequential. Realizing this was liberating for me, giving me confidence to take risks in building worthwhile initiatives.

- Be Great: be very good at what you do, which takes long hours and hard work. Be vigilant for information and network with others in your field. Know people, know names, skim articles and headlines—get the daily digest of the Chronical of Higher Education and get automatic alerts of newspaper articles with your school’s name in it. Learn everything you can about your areas of responsibility.

- Be Ready: a great piece of advice from Senator Gillibrand is to keep focused and on-point, have your goals prioritized and summarized, ready for any opportunity to move your agenda forward. Case in point: she gets only a precious few opportunities to talk with President Obama, such as in a receiving line at state events. She holds that handshake until she has delivered her quick but carefully worded request.

- Build Trust Through Transparency: communicate often and well. People will usually support you if they understand why you made a decision, and even if they do not, they will usually respect the decision if they see that you acted rationally. Why keep secrets? Except for personnel and other legally circumscribed issues, there are very few state secrets in the daily work of administration, especially at public institutions where your local newspaper could get your e-mail tomorrow with a Freedom-of-Information-Act request. (Let us pause and reflect on e-mail for a minute. Are you remembering that hot flash of panic when you hit “Send” too quickly or to the wrong person? Pick up the phone or talk face-to-face with people. It makes all the difference.) If you are doing your work in secret, I would suspect you have a breakdown in transparency and shared governance. I recently witnessed firsthand the result when our faculty unionized, for reasons I believe originated from a lack of administrative transparency at our university.

- The 3 Cs: some of the best advice I’ve ever heard for working with others came from the Honorable Jim Edgar, former governor of
Illinois (yes, the one who is not in jail), who lamented that politicians today seem to have lost sight of the three Cs: compassion, civility, and compromise.

- Power for Good: during an interview for my deanship, a very wise young staff member, Moises Villeda, asked me how I would handle the power. I said I didn’t think of it as power but as opportunity: having the resources to see and fix problems, to design policies and programs to help others. This is why you should want to be a leader. The moment an administrator starts thinking of the abilities of his or her office as “power” is the moment to be very careful of his or her actions and motives. What good things will you do? Tolerate no racism, sexism, homophobia, or other prejudices against yourself or others. Be a champion for those without voice— the marginalized in your community, the untenured in your department, or the minority students seeking admissions to your university and success once they get there. These are moral issues. Consider this: more than 40 percent of college freshmen, especially poor and underrepresented students, will not graduate, losing a year or more of their lives and the lifelong costs of not having a college degree, which even includes a shorter lifespan. This inequity is doing more to grow the gap between the classes in our country than anything else. It’s every administrator’s responsibility to change this. After all, no matter what your administrative title, your paycheck probably comes from tuition.

- Do the Right Thing: most administrators reach their posts because they are smart, good-natured, strong, flexible, trusting, and trustworthy. But circumstances sometimes elevate those who are not. I was lucky to have had five bosses who were great mentors and not only allowed me to speak freely to them, but also demanded it, confident enough in their own formidable abilities to want honest feedback from those around them. That made my job especially rewarding. But occasionally leaders are very destructive, motivated by calculating personal self-interest and ambition, and political agendas that outweigh their interest in facts or truth. If you find actions around you to be wrong or immoral, you need to stand on principle or else realize that you are an enabler. History is replete with a long line of despots who rose to power because those around them let them, turning blind eyes to their narcissism, paranoia, and cruelty. (Read Erik Larson’s *In the Garden of Beasts*, for a case study.) But if you do speak up about wrongdoing, understand that whistleblower protection laws are very narrow, and things that are unethical or immoral to your sensibilities are not always illegal. In other words, be prepared to be fired, to have no legal recourse, and for many to turn their backs on you. And so what? You will have done the right thing, and, assuming you have tenure and kept your scholarship going, you simply go back to (“forward to,” as a friend once corrected me) a wonderful job as professor, discovering new information and shaping young lives. Or, you move on to another position in a different unit or at a different institution. You’ll always have choices, and you’ll have your dignity.

- Be a Duck: Senator Gillibrand quotes Eleanor Roosevelt, “Do what you feel in your heart to be right—for you’ll be criticized anyway.” I think this goes well with a side of, “No good deed goes unpunished.” Develop a thick skin, let things roll right off your back like the proverbial duck’s. And for God’s sake, don’t go into administration if your goal is to be loved (and if you get any love, be careful in interpreting it). You will work with many wonderful people who will support you, but some who will not—because you have a title, because you made a decision that did not favor them, because they misunderstood you, because, because, because. Senator Gillibrand has some good advice about rising above it all in her memoir. I will say, however, that it’s also important to realize that people’s actions sometimes might not have anything to do with you personally. Look to the situation to understand people’s behaviors, resisting what we social psychologists call the “fundamental attribution error,” which is our hardwired tendency to attribute the causes of others’ behaviors to their personalities rather than situations. (Yes, there are a few people so toxic that the personal attribution will be correct no matter what situation, but not many.)

- Saying “Yes” or “No:” say “yes” to what is most important and “no” to everything else. Don’t waste your time on the small things, especially via e-mail which allows everyone and everything equal access to your precious time. Choose wisely among the many important things you could potentially do. Delegate as much as you possibly can, and prioritize and plan the rest. Toby Tate, once a dean and provost herself, told me, “The ambitious part of us is what gets us in trouble. I sort everything into three piles: (a) Absolutely Necessary: the basic elements of the job, the foundation, what you must do every day; (b) Important and Necessary: what should be done now, but not at the expense of the Absolutely Necessary pile; and (c) Important and Nice to Do: what should be done only if we have enough time. If something doesn’t make it into these three piles, then it’s gone. It all matters. But what matters most?”

- Surround Yourself With Wonderful People: seek mentors, colleagues, and friends who give you strength. Avoid those who drain you. Jess Salerno, one of my former graduate students now an assistant professor at Arizona State University, once told me, “I feed off of the excitement and energy I get from others who are smart and enjoy what I do... Having a network of really smart and engaged people to talk things over with, when I hit a snag, makes it
more like a fun puzzle to solve with friends, rather than me in the fetal position alone.”

- The Importance of Staff: staff are key to your and the institution’s success. Give them everything they need to do their jobs well, including information, tools, and support along with close supervision, but not micromanagement. Take care of them, making sure they are paid fairly and given credit publicly for everything, while you take the blame for their mistakes. The buck stops with you because you’re making the bucks. Do not be afraid to delegate, something that is very hard for women because we feel we must do everything and that the “boss” role is somehow unseemly or non-equalitarian. This is business: if you do not delegate everything someone else can do, you are not free to do what you were hired to do. Also, enjoy working with your staff, but do not mistake them to be your friends or expect some emotional notion of loyalty. Their job is to be loyal to the institution and do their jobs well, until they find another job that is better for them, a move you should celebrate rather than begrudge.

- Hiring and, Unfortunately, Firing: it is crucial to hire the very best people, those who are smarter than you, not necessarily those who have the most relevant experience or who are the perkier. I’ve hired forty people, including post-doctoral faculty fellows, unit directors, and administrative staff. Of those, 42 percent were minorities and 75 percent women. (A rich applicant pool will give you great opportunity to level society’s playing field, hire by hire.) Take hiring seriously and spend a lot of time on searches. Just as important, if a staff member is not effective after receiving much training, support, and clear instructions and expectations, you have a responsibility to move the person out of the job, always with the help of your institution’s human resources and employment law specialists. Sometimes this can be done pleasantly by finding a better-fitting position, but sometimes it’s not that easy. This can be one of the most daunting challenges of leadership because it feels as though you are personally betraying someone. But you have a moral obligation to guard your institution’s resources, and this is business. If you hesitate to fire those who are not doing their job, you will ruin your workplace because others will become demoralized by witnessing and having to compensate for their colleague’s shortcomings. The good news is that if you hire correctly, you will rarely have to fire anyone. I had to fire very few people, and none were people I hired.

- Dress for Success and Other Cautionary Tales: look your best, dress well, and wear heels, for good and bad reasons. For the good reason, Senator Gillibrand wisely notes that when she looks her best, she feels confident and is more effective. Research shows that the most confident people are the ones considered to be the most credible, and in turn, they are the most persuasive. Persuasion is the core of an administrator’s work. On those days you cannot muster the actual confidence, pretend. And now for the bad reason: research clearly shows that beauty, dress, and height do indeed matter for most measurable aspects of success, especially for women, where there are strong double standards. Women are expected to be beautiful, and if not, they are disliked, disrespected, and disparaged, especially as they age. As our editor, Nichola Gutgold, put it, “Women who are considered feminine or pretty will be judged incompetent, and women who are competent, unfeminine.” Beauty both holds us back and pushes us into success, cutting both ways. For example, when a colleague at another university once tried to reason with her university’s Institutional Review Board chairperson, he sat back and said, “The problem is that you’re just so pretty you’re used to getting what you want.” Just two nights ago at a large university donor event, a senior male administrator looked me up and down and said, “Oh, I didn’t recognize you, you look like a model tonight.” Such comments strip women of our authority, “put us in our place.” As Senator Gillibrand noted, regardless of the speaker’s intentions, which are sometimes genuinely good, comments about both beauty and the lack thereof would never be made about men, and they denigrate women leaders. People told her to lose weight in order to win an election. Offensive? Of course. Accurate regarding public perceptions? Probably, regretfully so.

What to do? Sometimes the law and/or institutional policy provide a route for seeking justice, but most of the time, they will not, because many offenses don’t rise to the level protected by laws or policies. You must consider the “offender’s” motivations, rank, and the possible repercussions. Do you want to die on that particular hill? Or do you want to hold off until you secure the platform from which you can change the system that often condones, dismisses, or doesn’t even recognize sexism? Laughing off a sexist comment from the man who holds the fate of your research protocol, who is considering hiring you, who is setting your raise or determining your promotion—it’s what we sometimes do to protect our careers, because those careers give us the platform to fight these issues effectively on a larger scale later. Some may bristle at this advice, but to confront every affront, especially those that are just stupid, is to risk being labeled the stereotypical “difficult woman,” and therefore, to risk never “getting off the sidelines and into the game” of higher education administration, where women’s voices are needed so badly. To be clear, I’m not talking about unambiguous cases of sexual harassment, when one should absolutely pursue charges, but even then, there’s no guarantee. (Think Anita Hill.) In an imperfect world, we all make person-
al decisions about where to draw the line. You have to find yours, and it should be informed by thinking about what you can do in the future to make things better for all girls and women. My line was crossed the other night, and I will do something, but not while I am vulnerable. Perhaps I’ll send him a highlighted copy of this chapter.

- Be a Duck, Part II: prepare to be treated badly occasionally. You’ll be the target of sexism, in subtle and blatant forms, and you’ll be treated as the living incarnation of several stereotypes—the stereotype of “administrator,” the stereotype of “woman,” and probably worse, of “woman administrator,” but probably not the stereotype of “leader” since that is reserved for men. (“Woman leader” is simply considered an oxymoron.) Stereotypes are knowledge structures, accurate or not. Administrators are failed academics, schemers for personal gain. Women are weak, driven by emotions, silly, and not particularly smart, especially at math and science. Leaders are strong, decisive, smart—and male. If believed, these stereotypes form people’s attitudes, which guide the impressions others form of you and their actions toward you. Most human behaviors are open to interpretation and attribution. Why did she do that? Make that decision? People’s answers will sometimes be constructed around the stereotype rather than the facts, determining whether they like you, trust you, give you the benefit of the doubt, support you—or not.

- Stereotypes underlie the “double standard,” with men and women being treated very differently for the same behaviors. As detailed in much work by Alice Eagly, leader-like qualities are praised in men because they are stereotype-consistent, yet the same qualities are held against women, because they are stereotype-inconsistent. A strong male leader is the ideal: a strong woman is a bitch (a derogatory, dismissive, and aggressively disrespectful term for which there is no male equivalent). Senator Gillibrand wrote about how the vitriol aimed at women in political leadership contexts far surpasses that aimed at men and is more often rooted in personal insult. She tells of unfair comments and criticisms she has received from her congressional colleagues about everything from her looks to her “ambition”—think about the very different connotations of that word when applied to men versus women.

What’s the practical effect? Compared to men, women occupy many fewer seats in most circles of leadership from business to politics to higher education, and we earn significantly less, partly because we are up to four times less likely to negotiate our initial salaries. (I’ve literally helped some women I have hired negotiate with me for their own salaries!) We have less power in society and in daily interactions from the least to most important settings. Men interrupt women more than they interrupt other men; they take credit for women’s words. How many times have you made a comment during a meeting, only for it to fall fawow until a man repeats it a few minutes later? And if you call attention to these things, you’re a shrew or worse. Recently, I heard a reporter ask someone whether he thought a woman politician had “ever used being a woman as an advantage to get elected.” Seriously? Women leaders get where they are despite their gender, not because of it. And it starts early—on playgrounds and in classrooms. Just the other day a freshman told me how proud she was to have made a computer circuit in her engineering lab, only for one of her male classmates to assume that her male lab partner had made it. I’ve been treated paternalistically by those highest in power to the lowest at our university. Sometimes this is to my advantage—you can be damn sure some of the building engineers stop by and check on the HVAC system in my college more than they might if I were a man, yet they are quick to dismiss me when I tell them what’s wrong. (If you don’t know what HVAC stands for, Google it. A carefully placed “HVAC” or “Nebbitt Unit” will score you credibility in this realm.)

So again, what to do? The best practical defense might be an offense: spend as much time as possible getting to know as many people as possible on a personal basis. Give them the reality of who you are rather than allowing them to fall back on their stereotypes. Beyond that, although things have certainly improved over the decades, truthfully, I don’t think we will see real change anytime soon. We have had an African American president, but even though women have a good chance in the 2016 election, I will believe it when I see it. Feminism is considered old school. In her book, Senator Gillibrand admitted fearing that the women’s movement is dead. Sigh.

- Life is Short: my senior quote in my college yearbook was from Schopenhauer, “Most people, if they glance back when they come to the end of life . . . will be surprised to find that the very thing they disregarded and let slip by unenjoyed, was just the life in the expectation of which they pass all their time.” Do what makes you feel happy and fulfilled now. Work/life balance is whatever you define for yourself. If your definition of happiness is working hard, fine. Other authors herein will probably offer much good advice about balancing child care with work. I don’t have children. You wouldn’t believe how many people have told me how wrong that decision was, mostly women, such as the woman in my department who informed me that “a person cannot be fulfilled without having children.” No one gets to pass judgment on the worth of your life or the choices you make.
• Not to belabor the point, but really—don’t assume you’ve got all the time in the world. Last year at age forty-nine, I survived what was nearly a massive stroke. Don’t think it couldn’t happen to you. I’m the picture of health. It was swimming that nearly did me in, good old exercise. I turned my neck too far, which stretched my carotid artery, which caused its little internal wall structures to tear and separate in my brain, trap blood, clot, and block a whole lot of blood from a whole lot of my brain. (Who knew, right?) To be fair, this is a rare event, but add up all the rare bad things that can happen and all the common bad things that can happen and you get pretty good odds that you’re not going to live forever. So, yes, thank you for asking. I am perfectly fine. There was no damage, for only one reason: I was not afraid to “cause a scene.” Read closely, because here’s the most important advice in this chapter: if you ever have an uncharacteristically bad and lasting headache, and/or if you feel any weird feelings on only one side of your body, find an emergency room immediately and demand to spend some quality time in an MRI machine. Do not worry about being overly dramatic. After several days of a bad headache, I had the good sense to walk off a stage in front of three hundred people and get the hell to the hospital when it felt like someone poured ice water down the side of my face and my arm went numb. Once I got to the hospital, because these classic symptoms had subsided a little and I was answering “most” of the cognitive test questions accurately, the neurologists started diagnosing a migraine and asking about the amount of stress I was under (the classic answer to all women’s health problems). Had I acted like most people typically do—especially women—I’d be deader than a doornail right now. Instead, I looked at the head neurologist and said: “I’ve studied memory for twenty-five years—the fact that I do not at this moment recall the president’s first name is a problem, a left-brain problem, to be exact. Get me in the magnet.” They were all soon appropriately humbled. After a lot of lying still and anti-clotting drugs, I am fine. Good brain.

Although what happened to me has no relation to job stress, this is the time to remind you to take care of yourself. In a recent NPR interview, Dana Perino, White House press secretary under President George W. Bush who just published a memoir, said she wished she had taken better care of herself. She abused caffeine, got little sleep, and “fretted all the time—but not outwardly.” Ditto here for much of my administrative life. That much responsibility is a lot to handle, and you need to find a way to do it without killing yourself (or the friends and family around you).

WHAT’S NEXT?

So, that’s my professional history and the lessons learned from it. I hope some of it was useful to you. There are many other useful books out there if you want to read more. In particular, to understand the research literature backing up much of what I’ve written, please read the work of social psychologist Alice Eagly and Linda Carli, especially Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders.

As I write this at age fifty-one, I know it is time for a change, as surely as I knew it after being associate dean for several years. I’ve accomplished everything I set out to do in the Honors College, and although it is a wonderful role, it has reached its expiration date for me personally. That means it’s time for the college to have a new dean, new initiatives. I will leave the role in 2015 feeling very satisfied, successful, and very proud of what the staff, faculty, and students of the college have achieved.

My leadership roles have given me a different perspective about my own institution and about the big picture of our American education system, its great challenges and opportunities. I have grown professionally and have the satisfaction of knowing I’m good at what I do. I would not change any of the paths I have followed. My valuable experiences now make it possible to follow a number of new paths, each a good option for different reasons. For example, I could jump ship completely. I am very impressed by the work done by the non-profit foundation community and have seen the incredible power of putting money in the right hands. I could take other dean positions elsewhere or become a provost or vice president at a variety of institutions. If I pursue that route, I will likely do so at a smaller liberal arts college, which I know myself as an undergraduate and which I value greatly. At such places, there’s less bureaucracy, less politics, and less distance between you and the students.

First, I am going to focus more on my faculty self. Although I never left my research, I miss being able to spend as much time on it as it deserves. I’m thinking of taking up a book project to consolidate and extend some of my past research, exploring societal reactions to and construction of memories for trauma over the last twenty-five years. I also miss teaching. And I believe I can do both research and teaching better now: administration taught me to work more efficiently than I ever have before, and it taught me to see the big picture. This path will also allow me to do something quite important: relax a little bit. It’s not that faculty members do not work hard or have stress in their jobs, but the work of high-level administrators is different. It is often not self-regulated, being directed by others who may or may not be excellent themselves. It has much sharper deadlines. The responsibility is by definition much greater because a leaders’ decisions affect not only themselves, but also the staff,
faculty, and students who depend on them. And leaders face far greater and swifter penalties for actions that don’t turn out well, both their own and others’ actions—the buck stops with them.

Figuring out which of these interesting alternative paths I’ll follow, if any, after regaining my faculty self for a while promises to be exciting. I will find something very interesting to do, a guarantee that’s just one more privilege resulting from wonderful academic training, varied experiences, and an enormous amount of hard work. One thing is for sure: my path will eventually lead back to the South. I began this chapter suggesting that, in part, negative aspects of the South drove me from it. But I’ve never lost a homesickness for all that is good within that culture, which maybe only southerners themselves truly understand and which does not include acceptance of the things that are still wrong there (and elsewhere) from this staunch Democrat’s perspective. In short, I need to spend the next part of my life back where I really fit. When I open an issue of Garden & Gun, I feel at home. Why yes, Yankee friends, there really is a magazine called Garden & Gun. It’s like Town and Country, only for the well-heeled rural southerner. It contains articles memorializing particularly good bird dogs (like my grandma’s beloved Dixie) and throwing the perfect holiday party in your stylishly renovated tobacco barn or strip room (Google it), with a pile of perfectly extruded cheese straws (Google it), next to a silver vat of one’s grandfather’s eggnog punch. (I indeed have my grandfather’s recipe but can’t get beyond the raw eggs, no matter how pickled with bourbon. It’s right next to Grandma’s recipe for cleaning a whole hog—don’t forget to singe the fur off the head!). (For the record, I am neither a gun nor hunting enthusiast. But I do know how to shoot.)

And with that, I will stop. It’s been a privilege to write this chapter, especially knowing that it might help you make your way through life and leadership within academia. It certainly can be a rewarding life of self-fulfilment and help to others. Best of luck as you find your path!

NOTE

1. I thank all the mentors I have had throughout my life, which includes more people than I can easily list, but certainly Emily Anne Hensley, Frank Murray, Gail S. Goodman, Phillip R. Shaver, Alex Rosen, Stanley Fish, Lon Kaufman, Michael Tanner, Sylvia Manning, Carole Snow, Karina Reyes, Robin Mermelstein, Shari Diamond, Beth Schwartz Livingston, Ralph Keen, Nancy Cirillo, and, of course, my husband, Gary Raney.