



Careers in Neuroscience / Career Paths: Academic Administration

In a nutshell: A career in administration taps a range of skills. People interested in this field tend to thrive on interacting with others and derive personal satisfaction from helping them realize their goals. They must also be organized, flexible, and able to manage their time well to meet daily commitments, as well as long-range goals. On top of those challenges, administrators also must be responsive to issues that come up unexpectedly.

Many Roads Lead to Academic Administration

Academic administration offers diverse career options, from jobs as department chair to positions as dean of academic affairs to vice-president or president jobs within large institutions. Serving as staff of an institute or center within an academic institution is another way to enter the field.

There is no one path for those interested in academic administration. In fact, this career option usually emerges after individuals have had other experiences. Some may try another career path, such as writing or editing, before coming to academia to serve as administrator. Others may progress through the ranks in academia, from assistant professor to associate professor to full professor, before deciding to make the switch. Those scientists who become administrators may keep their research labs going as they work for the academic institution in a completely different way.

Management and Organizational Skills Key

Working in administration means leading and managing people, helping to bring out their strengths and work on their weaknesses. People have different working styles and respond to feedback in varying ways, making it important for administrators to be creative and flexible in their dealings with faculty, students, and staff.

Other skills are also necessary. Strategic thinking and planning can be at the core of many positions. Depending on the level of the position, some budget work and financial planning is probably part of the mix. At senior levels, administrators must feel comfortable speaking to large groups and fund-raising for their institution. To wear these multiple hats, administrators tend to be organized and able to manage their time well. They also enjoy networking at conferences and large scientific meetings, and are skilled in interpersonal settings.

Work Description

The work of a neuroscientist in administration involves an array of responsibilities depending on the level of the position. Most administrators share the tasks of finding creative solutions to complex and difficult problems, managing a staff and overseeing a budget. Administrators also



tend to be involved in fund-raising through grant writing, speaking about the university to influential groups, or visiting prospective donors.

A junior level administrator may have a specific responsibility, such as managing an office charged with a focused mission; enhancing diversity at the institution is an example. A position like this might involve grant writing, partnering with institutions overseas to help bring about greater diversity, and working with underrepresented minority students to ensure that they have a supportive environment. This aspect of the job may require creating programs and implementing policies that build this kind of environment. At the chair/director level, program building most frequently involves recruitment of new faculty/researchers, as well as providing mentorship and career development for existing faculty.

At the level of dean, the responsibilities broaden. This position involves working with academic deans, the communications office, the admissions team, and administrative and financial staff to meet the strategic goals of the institution and realize its vision. This job is complex and includes negotiating with multiple constituencies to ensure that everyone is well served. Fund-raising, which frequently includes travel, is also part of the job. In addition, senior-level administrators attend many conferences and large scientific meetings each year. They are comfortable networking and meeting new people who could potentially work with their institution.

Climbing the administrative ladder to the level of vice president, vice provost, or dean, the responsibilities begin to encompass the entire institution. For example, a vice president of research makes decisions that affect all departments and all schools on campus. Therefore, this individual must have some knowledge of and interest in all academic areas, not just neuroscience, and must enjoy broad strategic planning. If the institution has an interdisciplinary focus, the vice president of research who is also a neuroscientist might suggest that the music department consider research activities that expand on findings pointing to the value of singing as a way for stroke patients to learn to speak again. Similarly, the dance department can consider studying how dance can help people with movement disorders.

At the department chair level, administrators are often expected to continue to do research and teach. At the dean level and higher, it is harder to continue to do research, though not impossible. Younger administrators may have a formal dual appointment, where half their time is spent in management and half is spent in teaching and serving on committees. Sometimes experiences in administration inform the research program, triggering explorations in fields such as social neuroscience.

More seasoned investigators tend to have established labs in place, with senior staff handling the day-to-day research-based operations. In those instances, however, the administrator is still involved and may write grants, analyze data, and work on papers. Many administrators working in an academic setting agree that research is still a passion—one they do not want to give up.



Place(s) of Employment

Academic institutions, including small, liberal arts colleges; mid-sized institutions with graduate programs; large universities offering a range of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs; and medical schools, all have numerous jobs in academic administration. The larger the institution, the more complex the job is. A large research institution has more departments to manage, more faculty and staff to interact with, and more detailed budgets to oversee. Administrators at state institutions also have to monitor changes in state funding, especially during downturns in the economy. At academic institutions, there may be opportunities to balance research and/or teaching with administration. High-level administrators at large institutions tend to have senior staff overseeing the day-to-day operations of the research lab as well as an administrative staff. Administrators at small, liberal arts colleges may work with undergraduates in their labs and not have additional staff.

Personal Characteristics

Neuroscientists working in administration tend to enjoy working with people and have exceptional management and leadership skills. Many are passionate about reaching a broad population and helping to improve the quality of their education. In fact, some point out that they find it exciting watching other people succeed. These individuals also are self-starters, assertive, and independent thinkers. They show the same energy and creativity in their administrative work as they do in their scientific careers.

Academic administrators also say that they were drawn to this field because they were looking for a new challenge. "After I became a full professor, I wondered what was next," remarks one administrator. "That's when I decided to try administration." Once in the field, the scientist/administrator stretches to become even more organized and efficient--skills needed to accomplish the range of tasks each day.

Education/Training

Typically, individuals in this career have the same education and training as those in standard faculty positions. As an undergraduate, they may have majored in a related area, such as math, computer science, biology, physics, chemistry, or psychology, but will then go to graduate school in neuroscience or a related field, earning a PhD. Following the PhD, these individuals receive postdoctoral training for two to seven years. During these training years, if a career in administration seems like a possibility, the neuroscientist can consider volunteering for a committee at his or her institution or with a professional organization, such as SfN. More experienced neuroscientists can learn about administration by assuming a higher level volunteer position with SfN, such as chairing a committee or running a program. Not only do these volunteer posts help determine whether this career path is a good fit, they also provide solid experience that is needed to get a position in administration. Rising administrators can



also look for leadership training opportunities at their institution or with professional organizations.

Career Trajectories

A career in academic administration can begin in many different ways. Some administrators start out as assistant professors on a tenure track and work their way up to full professorship. At that point, they may decide to make a career change and go into administration. Often they may gain experience at the institution in which they have earned tenure, but then, they may move to a different institution as their career in administration progresses.

Another path is to begin a career in administration with a dual appointment as an assistant professor and administrator. This path provides experience in two important areas in neuroscience, opening the door to multiple career options down the road. Gaining credibility as a researcher is considered important if neuroscientists want to pursue administration in an academic institution. That said, however, it can be hard to earn tenure while assuming major administrative responsibilities.

A third option is to work in writing or publishing and then transition to work in academic administration. Many neuroscientists have found that their writing experience is looked upon favorably in academia.

Employment Outlook

While tenure-track appointments in academia are becoming more difficult to find, the number of positions in administration is expected to grow over the next decade. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the growth rate is expected to be about 19%, largely due to increased enrollment at all institutions, including large research institutions, medical schools, four-year colleges, and two-year colleges.

Salary Information

The salaries for academic administrators vary considerably both by the level of the position and the particular institution. Entry-level positions start at about \$50,000, but administrators with a PhD tend to earn considerably more. With experience, academic administrators often make a salary over \$100,000, topping off at several hundred thousand dollars (Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/management/postsecondary-education-administrators.htm#tab-5>).

What You Can Do Now

Undergraduate Student: An interest in assuming leadership roles can emerge as early as the undergraduate years. Becoming involved in student government or committees is a



good way to test the waters. It is never too soon to start networking and meeting people. Down the road, early contacts can become mentors.

Graduate Student: There are even greater opportunities to explore an interest in administration in graduate school. Serving on committees and taking on leadership roles at school and within professional organizations offer rising scientists invaluable experience. By attending the SfN Annual Meeting every year, graduate students have opportunities to meet people who may become important as careers evolve and develop. "Aim high," says one administrator, "and if you suspect that you probably won't be staying in research, work on skills that will be valuable to you in other fields, such as writing and management."

Early Career: After completing at least one postdoc, the time may be right to start looking for a job in administration. Alternatively, if interests are divided between research and administration, it may be beneficial to continue focusing on your scientific training. At this stage, mentors may be particularly valuable in helping to hone in on career goals. One young administrator notes that her postdoc advisor was "extremely supportive and nurturing. We had lots of conversations about my strengths and things that he thought would promote me to the next level. A person like that can really help get you to a place you need to be."

Mid-Career: Mid-career is often the time that people already in academics are making a switch to administration. To find out if this career option is a good fit, seasoned professors could consider serving on an SfN committee or managing a program. Working in these positions allows scientists to meet high-level people in the field. These people can serve as mentors and be available as references when applying for administrative jobs.

Retirees: Most retirees from administrative jobs continue to be connected to their institution or organization. They may still engage in fund-raising, or they may be invited back to serve on panels or speak at special events. Serving in an administrative capacity, especially at a high level, earns a neuroscientist a lifelong role at their former place of work.

For More Information

The following websites have valuable information:

Society for Neuroscience: www.sfn.org



SOCIETY *for*
NEUROSCIENCE

Science Magazine:

http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2012_06_08/caredit.a1200065

Bureau of Labor Statistics: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/management/postsecondary-education-administrators.htm#tab-1>