The unheralded administrative assistant

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An excerpt from *Solitudes of the Workplace: Women in Universities.*

Illustration by Karolis Strautniekas.

The university as workplace has been imaginatively described by many observers of higher education: at any one university we might find Sanskrit scholars, accountants, glass blowers, philosophers and curators of pregnant hamsters (Henry Wriston, *Academic Procession: Reflections of a College President*, 1959). However, the quaintness of these occupations (barring the accountants) belies the full reality of the working university in that it fails to include all members of the campus community.

This exclusion of staff is endemic to the literature of higher education. Whether handbook, memoir, history or self-reflective volume, writing in higher education has largely ignored the presence of the many different campus workers who do everything but teach. University staff is often an afterthought, or more practically speaking, a non-thought. Indeed, the term “non-non,” surely the most cryptic of terms found in the American literature of higher education to describe university staff, reveals the university’s fixation on defining a large percentage of its workforce by what it does not do: non-academic, non-faculty, non-teaching, non-professional and non-classified.

Indeed, there is a lack of sincerity (or perceived value) in gaining any measurable appreciation of the university employee’s daily working environment. This reluctance could result from a distinct queasiness at the possible answers. While the university prides itself on its stance of political neutrality, freedom of speech and unconditional inclusivity, the internal working realities reveal that stratification – in multiple forms – is the campus norm.

Given the implacability of the faculty ranking structure, the tensions between academic and fiscal mandates, and the intense competition for internal and external resources, it is hardly surprising that the university remains a feudal enterprise. Within that enterprise, the staff predictably is placed in a “non” position as it compares with the rights

(and, admittedly, the obligations) that accrue to the other members of the university. Department heads, deans and other senior academic leaders are accorded a status akin to barons (rarely baronesses) and kings: these individuals are “held aloft by the drudgery of many common folk” (James Houck, “The Feudal Society in Today’s University,” 1990).

The craftspeople and skilled workers of the feudal society are analogous to the administrative, clerical and secretarial classes of the university. These individuals are not part of the society; instead, they “stand apart” from it. And standing apart certainly implies isolation. While staff can find a collective identity in organized labour groups and professional associations, their daily working environment leaves many of them isolated, particularly in academic units where there may be only one or two staff members.

Those whose occupations require them to work after regular office hours are particularly vulnerable: many university toilets are cleaned at night, when the rest of the university community has left the campus. The invisible nature of staff employees – whether nighttime custodians or administrative assistants – means that their working stories are largely absent or non-existent. They do not normally publish memoirs, leave items to institutional archives or produce other such records of their working experiences. There are no large sets of data, primary or otherwise, to attest to their experiences, although some studies on student services and labour relations have been completed as part of graduate work.

In the Canadian context, graduate projects have focused on the role of women staff, minority staff, professional development and informal learning, for instance. In regards to the history and development of the university staff complement, the literature is even thinner. Giving the university staff themselves a voice is an intense undertaking. Universities have invariably considered their resources to be better invested in hagiographic departmental and institutional histories, with few making any real effort to include the voice of staff beyond occasional references to on the one hand, employee dedication (“without whom the university could not function”) and, on the other, the travails of industrial action from the various unionized groups on campus.

Administrative assistant (a.k.a. “secretaries”)

of the many employee groups on campus, the administrative assistant is a constant at all institutions. The administrative assistant, a job title increasingly used instead of “secretary,” is invariably female. She is often the first person one meets upon entering a department or administrative unit. It has long been acknowledged that first impressions are critical to, for instance, prospective students (or parents) who are deciding on a university, prospective faculty members as they consider employment offers, and department heads or senior academic leaders in the midst of recruitment. A smile from the receptionist instantly creates an environment hopefully conducive to a successful outcome to the business at hand.

Furthermore, whether amenable or not, the assistant often acts as gate-keeper and general factotum. In an academic unit, she guards access to the department head and is privy to information – often of a highly sensitive and confidential nature – that no other staff or faculty member has. A trusted intermediary, the assistant can also be the department head’s prime source of information, being an integral part of the campus grapevine. The belief that she is the one person who really knows what’s going on has been sub-stantiated by research in both the public and private sectors (Jo Andrews, “Effective Communication,” in *Human Resource Management in Higher and Further Education*, 1995), and her ability to cultivate relationships for intelligence purposes is a much valued (and admired) skill.

Consider the university administrative assistant in greater depth. With very few notable exceptions, we know little of her working life, and even less about her feelings about the job and about the university as employer. An ongoing satirical column in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* regularly features “Maureen,” a departmental secretary at the fictional Poppleton University. Literary humour aside, Maureen’s working life is arduous and undervalued. In her book *Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities* (2004), Mary Evans describes Maureen’s role:

“Much of the work necessary to the continuation of the university, and the academic department, is performed by the hard-working secretary Maureen. Indeed, in this case “hard working” scarcely does justice to Maureen’s contribution. Maureen is always at work, when at work she is always in her office, and when in her office she is always fully aware of what is going on. As the academics stagger through their days in a haze of confusion, either internal or external, Maureen is always on hand to deal with student questions, the intricacies of assessment documents and the running of the department. A few academics take the managerial shilling and become the authors of complex business plans but in the main it is Maureen, for a salary which is probably half that of most academics, who literally services the academic world.”

Solitude and unacknowledged dedication

in the “real” university world, Maureen has her counterpart in countless nameless individuals, of whom only a few (perhaps just one?) have left a written record of her working days. The one splendid Canadian example is that of Dorothy McMurray, former secretary to four university presidents at McGill University. McMurray worked at McGill from 1929 to 1963 and at some time during, or shortly after, those years jotted down her memories of the many years spent in the president’s office. Ironically, McMurray’s *Four Principals of McGill* (1974) would probably never have survived had McMurray not received a phone call (on the very day she was culling her household contents, including these memoirs) from Stanley Brice Frost, director of the History of McGill Project.

Frost was aware that McMurray had recorded some notes and his well-timed phone call was a plea for their preservation in the interests of the university’s historical record. McMurray must have agreed with alacrity; and the book, once rescued from the rubbish bin, was subsequently published by the Graduates’ Society of McGill in a limited print run of 500 copies. Sold at $10 a copy, the book’s proceeds were donated at McMurray’s request to the McGill Development Fund.

Unfortunately, the book does not provide much detail of McMurray’s specific job duties. Rather, it focuses on the work of the four presidents themselves. Nonetheless, a poignant glimpse into the loneliness of her working life is found in her summation of the total experience: “I saw these four completely different personalities attempt the back-breaking, heart-breaking job of running McGill, and possibly there is no one left today who knows as well as I do what a really heart-breaking, back-breaking job it was.”

McMurray’s modesty allowed her but a few confessions as it related to her own capacity to do the work involved. On occasion, she conceded moments (and sometimes more) of physical exhaustion: eighteen months of having to “stumble home after a day much too long” might embitter employees today, but McMurray’s capacity for work was informed by a dedication to McGill and an unwavering loyalty to the presidential incum-bent. This loyalty, apart from an honorary degree, went largely unacknowledged by McGill’s institutional historians. McMurray’s dedication was also at variance with the oft-bruited suggestion that university staff have jobs whereas faculty have careers, the inference being that the former are more motivated by compensation than the latter.

Contributing to institutional history

yet secretaries and other university staff do want to be part of an institution’s history. As I learned during my interviews with staff, they want to leave a legacy that will be captured by historians and writers in higher education. As Alice, the pseudonym of a secretary who worked at the University of British Columbia from 1969 to 1971, remarked, “I would like to see a lot about the contribution of the people who are working there ’cause you always see a lot about who the head honchos were … all those guys they’ve had so much fame and fortune from the work they did at the university and of course it was deserved but there were so many people who were the cogs in the wheel who just never got any recognition at all” (interview with the author, 2007).

Brenda, a secretary employed at UBC in 2007, also explained, “I’d like to see more on, yes, the professors are important and the doctors and the research and everything but those of us behind the scenes that no one – no one really knows about.” At the very least, secretaries and other staff want to be recognized as being an integral part of

the university, rather than a silent, unacknowledged or “back-stairs” group. This may particularly be the case for the university assistant who, as has been earlier described, is often the first person seen upon physical entry to a university unit, whether administrative or academic.

Away from the reception desk, she is responsible for a myriad of tasks, activities and priorities that all elude the casual observer. For the employees themselves, these tasks aggregate to what is often a fulfilling (if sometimes tiring) working experience. Indeed, it is striking how many assistants (i.e., former secretaries), despite the passage of many years for some of them, have retained rich, informative memories of their working environments, their daily tasks and the people with whom they worked.

Common themes and memories emerge. These remain reasonably uni-form throughout the decades: thoughts about wages and benefits (and lack thereof), enjoyment or dislike of the work, relationships (testy, friendly or otherwise) with staff colleagues and faculty, and issues of hierarchy, status and respect. Regardless of the circumstances of the individual, their words sharply convey, on the one hand, a strong sense of community and interest in the university, and, on the other, an equally strong sense of isolation and exclusion.

A call for recognition

how staff perceive the institution in which they work, their roles within it, their daily experiences, and their ability to navigate their own personal and professional paths is important, if only for their labour to be recognized as an integral contribution to a university’s success. How they can expose their particular solitude on campus remains to be determined. At the very least, however, there needs to be a concerted effort on behalf of university leaders to understand the needs of an increasingly educated, politically aware and less deferential workforce. The systematic capture and preservation of historical and current working experiences of these workers would go a long way to mitigating the invisible nature of their contributions.

Excerpted from Chapter 8 of Solitudes of the Workplace: Women in Universities*, edited by Elvi Whittaker (McGill-Queen’s, 2015), “The Non-Nons: Secretarial and Clerical Staff,” by Isabella Losinger. Ms. Losinger is a former academic librarian who now works at the University of British Columbia. She has a long-standing interest in the university as a workplace.*