

It's Still a Rat Race: The Parallels Between Research and Administration

November 10, 2004

APS Past President **Elizabeth D. Capaldi** is vice chancellor and chief of staff of the State University of New York.

It was self defense: I became department chair to prevent a chair from possibly ruining my life. I taught and did research for 20 years before getting into administration and certainly didn't intend to become an administrator. But my belief is that to do academic administration you must be an academic, so that you understand the culture and values of higher education. I was (and am) a laboratory scientist, running rats, and I have taught introductory psychology for years. Teaching gave me a great background in terms of relevant content, and running a lab taught me some good techniques that apply to running an academic unit.

Maybe the most important of these is the ability to make decision quickly. I heard Margaret Thatcher say that being a housewife prepared her for being prime minister. She said the jobs are actually quite similar, in that both require many decisions. And she said she learned as a housewife that whether you take a long time to make a decision – such as having steak for dinner – or a short time, you still end up having the steak for dinner. To run animal research you need to decide what procedures to use without enough information, but you decide to the best of your ability and move forward, knowing that delaying only makes things worse. In academic units, nothing is worse than lack of direction and clarity. I once made these points during a talk on Bring Your Daughter to Work Day. Afterwards, a colleague of mine took his daughter for ice cream, and as soon as they entered the ice cream parlor she said, without hesitation, "I'll have chocolate. Provost Capaldi says you have to make decisions fast."

Tracking Cantor	
Key dates in Elizabeth Capaldi's ascension to administration	
2003	Named vice chancellor and chief of staff of The State University of New York system
2000	Became provost and professor of psychology at the University at Buffalo, SUNY

1996	Became provost of the University of Florida
1969 - '88	Faculty, head of department of psychological sciences, and assistant dean of the graduate school at Purdue University
1969	1969 Received PhD in experimental psychology from The University of Texas at Austin

In animal learning, the fundamental principle is that behavior that precedes reinforcement will increase in strength. I have used this principle throughout my career. Years ago, a faculty member to whom I gave a fairly good raise entered my office angry and complaining. I said, "How can you complain? I gave you an above average raise." "Maybe you gave everybody an above average raise," he replied, all his statistical training going out the window. I said, "If you are going to punish me by complaining when I give you an above average raise, I might as well give you nothing. Don't you know about rewards and punishments?" The next day he put a bag of M&Ms in my mailbox.

Money, space, and praise are some of the incentives administrators can use to improve their units. I have done this as a department chair at an individual level, praising hard-working teachers and researchers, giving them raises on merit, and allocating space and other important commodities so they could continue to do excellent teaching and research. As provost at two different universities, I used the same principles to allocate budget to schools within the university. Schools that increased in enrollment or increased in sponsored research received increased funding from the university. And in the State University of New York system, we use the same principles to allocate budget to colleges and universities. While of course costs and expenses are part of budgeting, using at least part of the money to reward desired outcomes works as well to improve performance for universities as it does for individuals.

The principle of achieving administrative goals through reinforcement also applies to lobbying and fundraising. People do not give you money because you need money. Everyone needs money. People give you money because you help them achieve their ends. Many potential donors are looking for some legacy or meaning in their lives, and we have something very meaningful to invest in – education and research. Showing person how their investment can change students' lives or potentially cure disease is immensely rewarding to them. State legislators also want to make a difference and will give you money if you can show that investing in you will produce jobs, help the environment, or achieve the legislator's

top goal, whatever it might be. The good thing about universities is we can indeed help achieve almost any goal.

When I started in animal learning and trained my first rat to press a bar, I never anticipated I would end up a provost and then vice chancellor, and I certainly didn't know that I would use the same principles I first saw as an undergraduate to produce change in organizations.