A friend and fellow academic recently told me that her dean, who directs a professional school at a state university, spends most of his time at conferences hanging out with professors from his institution, as well as with their graduate students and his co-authors on research papers. She said, and I agreed, that such habits typified "a good professor, but a bad dean."

My friend added, however, that she was in a minority in her negative appraisal. Most of her colleagues thought her dean was doing a fine job. I think I know why: They evaluated him the same way they evaluated one another, on the basis of his strengths as a professor —and concluded that a good professor equals a good dean.

I disagree. An administrator of a large, big-budget unit should be supportive and cognizant of faculty and student research, and may keep up a (modest) personal research agenda, but a university and its faculty and staff members and students are best helped by a dean who uses conference time for outreach to peers, alumni, and donors.

The variations between professor and administrator are of concern to me because I have just made the transition: This summer I became director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa —my first unit-head post after some stints at associate-level administration. Formerly I served two terms as an associate dean for graduate studies and research.

What I have learned from my limited management experiences, talking with administrators I admire, and reading literature on academic management is that some of the qualities that cause us to excel at teaching, research, or even service are not the same as, and may run counter to, the attributes and attitudes that make for a good administrator.

For example, in many cases, professors can make quick decisions based on a single source or data point. A student comes to your office and says he can't understand an assigned reading, so you spend time with him and work it through until he gets it. Problem solved. Move on.

But many of the issues faced by a unit head or higher manager in academe are tangled up in priorities, emotions, rules, procedures, and human relations. To be an administrator is, in part, to accept the role of
bureaucrat, with all the caution and deliberation that the word and the role imply.

Case in point: A provost-level administrator at a liberal-arts college told me about a faculty delegation that came to him complaining about a department chair, who they claimed was acting highhandedly and not sufficiently consulting them. After many weeks of document review and follow-up interviews with faculty and staff members, the administrator decided that the situation was not egregious enough, nor the faculty members united enough in opposition (the hostile faction made up only a quarter of the full-time professors), to warrant asking the chair to step down. Predictably, no one was happy with the decision or the time taken to reach it. The department leader and his allies felt that the administrator should have chastised the complainers; the restive professors thought that their original demand should have been met promptly. But I would argue that the measured pace and thorough investigation demonstrated responsible management.

There are other essential differences in the temperaments and attributes required in academic administration. Dedication, for example. As long as you don't shirk your basic teaching and departmental duties, you are considered a virtuous professor when you teach and do research on what you love. Professors are, and should be, encouraged and rewarded for passion for their work.

In administration, however, one's passions and personal interests should not influence decision making about needs and priorities. If I suddenly announced plans to give my cherished research area extra financial support, expanded course offerings, new hires, scholarships, and so on, the faculty and my superiors would rightly demand greater justification than "I love it."

Another divide between being an administrator and a professor concerns the nature of personal relationships. As a faculty member, you might have a student who takes several of your courses, is excited by your research, and asks to work with you as your assistant. You get her the position, and a lifelong mentor-protégée relationship is born. In a sense, you are playing favorites, but in a positive way: The benefits are reciprocal, and other students are not hurt, since a hiring criterion for a research or teaching assistant should be interest in the subject.

Administrators, on the other hand, must work not only with people they appreciate and admire but also with those they don't. In my own case, when starting a previous administrative position, I found out my first day on the job that a senior faculty member had strongly and loudly opposed my selection. It was his right to do so. But my position required that I cooperate with everyone regardless of race, class, creed, gender —and whether or not they liked me or supported me. (Incidentally, my response over the next several years was to go out of my way to work with him and support his career advancement for the good of the school. He is now a friend and professional reference.)

Another key difference between an academic role and an administrative one is the freedom to make independent decisions. As a professor, you can (although probably shouldn't) make major decisions about your career without consulting anyone. For example, before I begin a new project —such as my next book —
I seek the approval of a committee of only two: my wife and myself. Yes, I talk with mentors and fellow researchers in my area. And I deliberate on sources for financing my research. But at the end of the day, I am the captain of my own scholarly schooner; if it sails on gloriously or crashes into the shoals, it's largely to my own credit or blame.

Academic administrators, in contrast, cannot just wake up in the morning with a great idea and, by fiat, radically change something in a university, school, or department that affects potentially hundreds or thousands of other people. You must respect openness and governance. In my most recent associate deanship, I helped organize the revision of our school's guidelines for promotion and tenure. I consulted with about 30 peers in other schools in my field and comparable units on our campus. Then our promotion-and-tenure committee worked hard and long to craft the new language and set the new scales. It was a team effort and a group document, which made it both comprehensive and unanimously acceptable to the faculty.

The same distinctions hold true in money matters. Some faculty members have supervisory capacity over money that affects other people, perhaps after winning a grant or being assigned a budget for a project or chairing a scholarship committee.

But once you enter the realm of unit-level administration, your freedom to spend money as if it were your own diminishes markedly. I must now decide whether our school should purchase new videoconferencing technology. Although our chief staff member and a professor have taken the lead in studying the costs and alternatives, my decision will probably take a few months. I want to learn more about the system and see and hear it in operation, I must wait to learn what other technology acquisitions might be more important, and above all I have to figure out how to pay for it. The money I approve spending will no longer be something that I can conceptualize as being mine; it's other people's money, which I have been lent to invest for the good of the unit.

Finally, there is the matter of interpersonal relations. College professors can develop communication skills tailored to specific audiences —undergraduates, graduate students, fellow academics —and even to certain venues: the large lecture hall, the graduate seminar, the conference presentation, the faculty meeting. But we can go years without talking with outsiders in a professional capacity —perhaps just parents at commencement.

As an administrator, however, I am both Mr. Outside and Mr. Inside. I have to answer the phone, return e-mail messages, and meet with all sorts of folks —parents, yes, but also reporters, professionals, prospective and current students, alumni, donors, the public, staff and faculty members, peers, and other university administrators.

Moreover, my outreach as an administrator can't be conducted in my native language of social science. I have to adapt explanations and descriptions to the target audience. A dean —and certainly provosts and presidents —must be able to offer both a pithy sound bite and a comprehensive five-year plan, to be a gracious toastmaster as well as a clear PowerPointer.
In sum, while a good professor and good administrator may very well inhabit the same body, the two endeavors demand different qualities, as well as similar ones. Sometimes those differences chafe: Gather together professors, and complaints about managerial boorishness, incompetence, and scheming frequently froth up. Convene administrators, and tales of lazy, irresponsible faculty members soon erupt. Both narratives have a basis in reality but can spiral into permanent suspicion and antagonism. No surprise that the mood on some campuses is one of confrontation, especially in an era of flat or falling resources and difficult fiscal choices.

But a university divided against itself will no more prosper or even survive than a cleaved house or country. In the years to come, as higher education faces greater challenges, our two mind-sets must, if not converge, at least attempt to understand each other better. Learning about and accepting our differences, and agreeing on what constitutes excellence in our separate vocations, are good places to start.