

Tales from the Crypt: Surviving Academic Politics - Lee Ryan

Do you want to be a community college instructor because you want a job where someone else does the thinking for you and you just follow orders? Of course not! You want to be creative and innovative. You want to shine!

The Japanese have a saying: “The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.” And it’s true: the more you shine, the more petty jealousy and resentment you are likely to face.

It’s pretty depressing, isn’t it? Legions of wonderful, idealistic new instructors get “hammered down.” They get disillusioned by academic politics and end up leaving the teaching profession.

It doesn’t need to be that way. You don’t need to check your backbone at the college door. You can be the star that you are destined to be—but only if you follow a few simple rules about how to survive academic politics.

You’re probably saying to yourself: “who’s this guy, Lee Ryan Miller, who thinks he knows so much?” Well, let me tell you. I’m the guy who made every mistake in the book. And I paid for each of them. But I also learned some valuable lessons in the process. I’m going to share those lessons with you today.

So, who am I? I’m a political science professor. I got my first full-time teaching job at the Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN) in 1998.

I lost that job in 1999. Was I a bad instructor? No, I was one of the best they had. I started several successful new programs. The newspapers published articles about my innovative teaching. My students loved me.

So why did I lose that job? Here’s the irony: This political science instructor failed to pay attention to office politics. I’d thought I was on the fast-track to tenure and instead ended up as roadkill.

After losing this job, I was hurt and depressed. But I was also stubborn. So rather than giving up on a career as an educator, I got another job.

My second job was at Cypress College, a community college in southern California. At this job, I applied the lessons I’d learned at CCSN. But, of course, I made different mistakes the second time around. Bad mistakes. And I learned from them.

But I didn’t lose my job at Cypress. I’d learned to play the game of academic politics. And this time I came out on top.

Now, I bet I know what’s going through your mind: “I hate politics. It’s a despicable business. I don’t want to have anything to do with it.”

I can sympathize with you. I have a Ph.D. in political science and I know just how repugnant politics can sometimes be. But I also know that it is unavoidable. Or at least, it’s unavoidable if you want to be an excellent instructor *and* keep your job. I’ll bet that you want to do both!

First of all, let me share a dirty little secret with you: you find politics in all workplaces. But outside of Capitol Hill, you won’t find a workplace with more intense politics than at an educational institution.

Why? Well, here’s my theory. A career in education attracts intelligent, creative people who value their autonomy. These are the sort of people who want to achieve excellence but *don’t* want to be told what to do. If you place people like this in an environment of shared governance—where you get to sit on committees and have a say in how things are run—they will butt heads. It’s inevitable.

New instructors often are not prepared for the intensely political atmosphere in which they find themselves. If you are not prepared for this, no matter how talented you are, you may end up leaving the teaching profession within a few years, disillusioned and embittered.

Graduate programs rarely address this topic. This article will fill that gap.

Lesson #1: Build a network of alliances.

When I got my first job, at the Community College of Southern Nevada (CCSN), I put all my energy into being the best instructor that the college had ever seen. I was working around 60 hours per week doing all sorts of innovative things. For example, I structured my classes around discussion and debate (which took a lot of preparation). I developed the first web-based political science curriculum at the college. I applied for a grant and used it to set up a government internship program. I brought a series of prominent elected officials to speak at the college. I even developed a study abroad program that got lots of positive attention in the local news media.

But I didn’t do the most basic thing. I didn’t develop a strong network of alliances. In other words, I didn’t take the time to chat with my colleagues much in the office or to socialize with them much outside of it.

Of course, it didn’t help much that they gave me an office in a trailer out in “Siberia” in the back of the college. It also didn’t help that they gave me all night classes when no one else was ever around. Nevertheless, I should have known better. I do now. I paid dearly for my mistake.

What happened to me is a great story. I tell it in my book, *Teaching Amidst the Neon Palm Trees*. But let me tell you a small part of the story right now. I made a lot of people jealous. My innovation and excellence were perceived as threatening by some of my colleagues who didn’t want to work as hard as I did.

The tragedy of it all is that when the going got rough, very few people were willing to stand up for me. That was my own fault. I hadn’t developed a network of alliances to protect me when the forces of mediocrity started massing for an attack.

Lesson #2: Make friends with staff.

Often, politics in an educational institution revolves around a series of battles between instructors and administrators. In this environment, it is easy to overlook the “third estate” (as we political scientist might call them)—the classified staff. Secretaries, administrative assistants, office managers and the like can be powerful allies or powerful enemies. Their power lies in their invisibility and their indispensability. They usually keep quiet and stay out of the political wars. And they usually know where all the bodies are buried.

At CCSN, I developed a good relationship with our department secretary. When the “axis of evil” struck and most of my colleagues suddenly became afraid to talk to me, our department secretary told me what was going on. She told me who was behind the attack and who was on my side.

Unfortunately, this information was not enough to save my job. But things could have turned out a lot worse, had I lacked the vital intelligence that my ally in the staff had provided. In the end, my contract was not renewed, but the administration had no good reason to fire me and they were forced to pay my salary for a year after I left.

That gave me the time and resources to write a book about the experience. It also spurred me to find a much better-paying job at Cypress College in southern California. I took the lessons I learned with me when I left Las Vegas for Orange County. But I still had more lessons to learn in my new job.

Lesson #3: Build a wall between your job and your personal life.

There’s an old saying: good fences make good neighbors. It’s very true. There are several ways to interpret lesson #3. Let’s start with the most obvious. If you bring the stress from home to work with you, it will harm your teaching; if you bring the stress from your job home with you, it will harm your relationship with your family.

This, as I said, is obvious. And it doesn’t have much to do with politics. But another interpretation of this lesson does. If you can avoid it, DO NOT work at the same college as your significant other. If you do work in the same place, you run the danger that office politics will take a severe toll on your relationship.

Let me tell you a story. At the same time that I was hired at Cypress College to teach political science, a new dean was hired. The new dean, my supervisor, seemed really nice.

Fast forward to a fateful day nearly halfway through my first semester. There was a short-term intensive ethnic studies course that was supposed to begin in a few days. The instructor scheduled to teach the course had backed out at the last minute. The dean—my boss—was frantically trying to find someone to teach the class.

Beth, my fiancée at the time, was a civil rights leader. Beth had a masters degree in a subfield of ethnic studies. I suggested to my boss that she ask