

Reforming Challenged Departments: The Faculty Role

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In an [earlier piece](#), our team described a dashboard that serves as an early-warning system of indicators that can show when an academic unit is on the brink of dysfunction -- or, even worse, already mired in it. We developed that resource, the Academic Unit Diagnostic Tool (AUDiT), primarily with administrators in mind, although entire departments have come to use it over time.

Our project has worked with department-level and more senior university leaders to explore how to use this diagnostic tool to shape strategies for intervention before they become debilitating. In talking with those leaders, we have found that while every department has distinct features, the broad outlines of what constitute healthy departments and dysfunctional ones fall into identifiable patterns.

We do not see those problems only as administrative issues: faculty members who recognize some of the same early-warning signs also share some responsibility for dealing with them. We believe in shared governance: we want faculty and administrators to talk frankly about what is and isn't working, with mutual responsibility for dealing with those issues. Moreover, most cases have no simple solutions. A long-term approach to reform requires a shared commitment and buy-in by all parties.

We've identified some of the major warning signs in an academic department, especially as they reflect indicators or trends over time:

- a growing number of formal complaints or grievances;
- regularly fractious department meetings;
- harassment or accusations posted in email or other social media;
- silos between programs or groups among the faculty;
- weak hiring decisions and/or contentious processes in making them;
- an increase in faculty departures;
- sloppy promotion and tenure procedures and/or contested cases;
- bullying of colleagues, students or staff;
- declining scholarly or research productivity, including grants;
- financial disarray or mismanagement;
- generational discord over important issues facing the unit;
- individuals who circumvent established administrative and committee procedures;
- drops in enrollment numbers or student quality, along with students who take too long to finish or have difficulty on the job market;
- curriculum stasis, lack of currency or innovation;
- excessive individualism; and
- lack of regard for the department's shared purposes.

Most of these and similar sources of difficulty can have both a faculty and a leadership dimension. Indeed, in our experience, faculty behaviors sometimes spur or reinforce unconstructive administrative responses -- and vice versa. Some, like managing the unit's budget, generally fall mainly within the administrative sphere; others, like scholarly productivity, fall mainly within the faculty's purview. But nearly all issues and problems have both administrative and faculty governance dimensions. Furthermore, these various unit dynamics interact in complex ways that require a systemic and holistic perspective.

Faculty members are often loath to raise such issues in public, even when "everybody knows" there is a problem. Why?

First, as we noted in our original piece, different groups sometimes view issues differently. Faculty members may see an issue as a problem of bad administration; administrators may see the very same problem as a problem of the faculty failing to take responsibility. Even within the faculty, junior and senior faculty members, or male and female faculty members, for example, might have very different takes on a problem. Indeed, in some cases they might even disagree about whether a situation *is* a problem, or if it is, why and what to do about it.

The faculty point of view is rarely homogenous. Sometimes, in fact, the faculty is highly factionalized and *can't* come together with a shared sense of what is happening in the department, good or bad -- and those divisions become their own problem, as well as an impediment to change. Administrative intervention to try to broker and bridge those differences can be essential.

Second might be a misplaced sense of collegiality. C. K. Gunsalus recounts a story in her book on departmental leadership of a unit head who wrote to the provost's office to express concern that a faculty member had threatened to kill him. When told that one option was going to the police, the letter writer said no, doing that would be too "uncollegial." Gunsalus asked how collegial it had been for his colleague to threaten to kill him. Many faculty members, especially tenured ones, are long-term members of their units and leery of alienating colleagues who might be their neighbors for decades to come. So it is easier to overlook behavior, or rationalize it away, rather than surface it for discussion.

Third, faculty members are busy with their individual projects and have many demands on their time, pursuing goals and priorities that are important for their future careers. Spending time and energy getting embroiled in departmental conflicts is not only a distraction from those other concerns; it is easy to believe that as an individual one is benefited more by doing what is mainly within your control than in engaging complex and controversial local issues that you feel little capacity to influence and change. Alternatively, the faculty members embroiled in such conflicts sometimes feel they are more contained than they really are: these things have a tendency to seep into the life and culture of the larger unit more pervasively than it is comfortable to acknowledge.

Fourth, some faculty members may actively prefer to delegate such issues to leaders to worry about -- not only because they don't wish to tackle them themselves but also because their us/them view is that the faculty ought to stand together versus "those" administrative people who get paid to worry about such matters. That attitude may lead, ironically, to granting to administrators even greater powers to try to solve matters. Meanwhile, because faculty members aren't implicated in making those administrative decisions, they retain greater latitude to criticize or reject them. In more extreme forms, that binary worldview leads faculty members to reflexively take the side of their colleagues, even when they know they are in the wrong.

One wonders, for example, about the numerous cases in the press lately regarding faculty misconduct, sexual harassment and inflammatory political rhetoric. Institutional administrators face the challenge of balancing valuable norms of free speech or academic freedom with protecting the reputation of their institution as a haven for such views. Such challenges have provided some of the most contentious controversies in higher education over the past several years. But a key question in those stories is: Where are the faculty voices holding their peers accountable?

Instead what we see is a deep reluctance to speak out. Sometimes that is because of faculty members' reflexive suspicion of administrators and immediate tendency to default toward defending a faculty colleague, no matter what. Sometimes it is because of notions of union solidarity. Sometimes it is because of loyalties based on identity categories and/or shared political ideologies. Sometimes it is all of the above. As a result, we often see variations on the bystander effect: people unwilling to take a public position even in situations that they know are wrong. Administrators often do not have that luxury.

Another example of such unhealthy dynamics is dealing with faculty bullies -- one of the most unpleasant situations to resolve in academic environments. There are different kinds of bullies. The obvious is the assertive, domineering bully. The less obvious is a "victim bully," a person skilled in passive-aggressive behaviors that put others on the defensive while acting as if *they* were the aggrieved ones. In both cases, it is challenging and uncomfortable to find strategies for dealing with bullies, especially when, over time, their conduct has ruled the day. Avoidance is easier than confrontation.

The first rule is that the group, collectively and individually, must stop ignoring or rationalizing this behavior, whether that is through silence in the face of aggression or giving way as the path of least resistance in the moment. Here, too, the challenge is to avoid rewarding the behavior (while also remaining conscientious about addressing the possibly real inequities or harms that are being claimed).

Many of these faculty responses, it should be clear, may already be indicators themselves of a department having difficulties. Avoiding responsibility, burying or putting off problems so that one doesn't have to deal with them, externalizing blame, being afraid to speak out about an issue publicly that everyone acknowledges is a problem behind closed office doors -- they all suggest a faculty that can't or won't deal with difficult choices.

So how do we create a sense of shared faculty responsibility? How do we create a culture in which faculty positively reward and support one another *and* hold one another accountable? One part of moving forward is to talk openly about the factors that discourage doing so. Facile excuses like “Stay in your lane” or “Live and let live” assume a model of highly independent and self-determining faculty choices. They work well in contexts where faculty members are productive and professionally responsible, but in other cases, such excuses become yet another manifestation of underlying problems. How do we create a sense of shared responsibility and accountability within an academic community?

The challenge is to try to create a climate of professional honesty *and* respect in which difficult topics can be broached and engaged civilly. There may be cases where more confrontational discourse is necessary, but an academic unit climate in which this becomes a frequent occurrence cannot engage in the fact-based and deliberative discourse essential to the activities of knowledge creation, instruction and shared decision making on which the university model depends. Unfortunately, we live and work in a time in which it appears that the more confrontational model is on the rise -- across the political spectrum.