

Our Hallways Are Too Quiet

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April 3, 2017

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When I recently returned to my department after a decade in administration, I looked forward to reconnecting with former colleagues, getting to know the grad students, going to lectures and colloquia, teaching undergrads, and yes, even serving on departmental committees. But when I moved into my faculty office and began my work schedule, I had only one question as I looked around my department: Where did everybody go?

A 10-year absence presented a fairly stark before-and-after picture of a very real transformation that is happening on our campuses. Many faculty rarely come into their offices anymore.

Entire departments can seem like dead zones, and whole days can pass with only a glimpse of a faculty member as someone comes to campus to meet a student, attend a meeting, or teach a class. The halls are eerily quiet. Students, having figured this out, are also absent. Only the staff are present.

One should be very careful not to dramatize what are really the ordinary and quotidian changes in institutional landscapes that occur almost imperceptibly over time, but I believe that something important is happening.

Some faculty avoid the campus for the oldest of reasons: They can't get any work done there. Work styles vary dramatically, and faculty are very protective of those habits that allow them to make progress on their projects. For many, particularly senior professors who remember the more raucous departmental hallways of yore, the social demands of departmental appearances canceled out any possibility of actually reading or writing in one's office. And let's not forget the poisonous atmosphere created by faculty feuds. People become very reluctant to hang out in the department for fear of getting pulled into the drama.

A big reason for decreased faculty presence in their campus offices is technology. Networked computers that allow

one to write anywhere also allow us to have conversations with students and colleagues that used to take place in person. Creating new course materials and ordering books is easily done online. Cloud software has made pretty much all our work processes easily done from home, a vacation cabin, a foreign conference hotel. For many scholars, this has been a very liberating occurrence, giving them wondrous flexibility.

And then there has been the paradoxical cost of making the workplace family friendly. Departments have been trying — very belatedly — to accommodate the realities of modern life: more mothers working, more fathers sharing child care, more faculty members looking after aging parents, more couples forced into a commuting relationship. And that's all great. Yet when some academics work off campus as a way of solving a family challenge, others seem to take it as a sign that every faculty member is free to work at home.

The notion that no one really needs to work on the campus, however, has significant structural consequences for departments. One faculty member working at home a few days a week is barely noticeable. Nearly all of them working at home most days is far more serious.

Of course there are exceptions to the empty hallways. Some departments have explicitly asked professors to "work at work" more. Some people prefer to work in their campus offices to escape the appealing diversions that lurk near their home offices. Others like the simple routine of getting out of the house.

But in many places, they are the exceptions. For many — and perhaps most — academics, their departmental office has become a storage space for books and a respectable place to meet with students. And that's about it.

Why does any of this matter?

Some would argue that worrying about departmental community is ridiculous. After all, professors aren't hired or promoted on the basis of departmental relationships, or civic engagement, and most faculty members desperately need quiet time in which to do research and write. True enough.

No doubt other skeptics would recall the downside of busy, occupied departmental offices (see: feuds and random banter, above). What does it matter if faculty do their work off campus, just so they get it done, right?

For new and junior colleagues, it might seem that there is no there there. Why should they come to work in an empty department? Indeed, senior professors send a powerful message by their invisibility in the department: Face-to-face interactions are just not important.

Without such interactions, however, what keeps junior faculty engaged? How do we communicate values? Or share readings, provocative conversations, and inspiration? Why should young academics try to build a professional life in a place where there is no one to talk to? Students, and especially graduate students, face similar questions. What does it mean these days to be a member of the academic community?

As my colleague, Sherry Turkle, [has argued](#): Conversation matters. Personal contact matters. It is very hard to build relationships with people we do not see in person, and such relationships are the bedrock of so much else that matters on any campus.

Hiring new faculty members, promoting and tenuring them, celebrating their accomplishments — all of those things are more difficult when we don't regularly relate to one another. We are losing our ability to work through our differences, learn how to compromise, build new initiatives, and fight our common battles.

We seem to be losing our sense of the commons, and perhaps our empathy for the trials and tribulations of academic life. In privileging the individual faculty member's particular circumstances and preferences, we may be threatening the department itself.

There are some ways to reverse this trend. The primary one begins with the university or college itself, which — in

its tenure and promotion decisions — seems to demand ever more attention to publications and ever less to collegiality and community. We need more campus discussion of these trends and how to counter them to strengthen departmental relationships.

Locally, department heads — who communicate what a department's expectations regarding faculty presence will be — could discuss with their faculty the changing realities of academic life, and how to deal with the "absence" question. Some departments have agreed to explicit recommendations asking professors to spend more time in the office, while others have created events such as regular colloquia, lunches, teas, and happy hours to give people a chance to interact. Some may view those social opportunities as a huge time-waster. I would argue that, on the contrary, collegiality and collaboration are part of what we are paid for.

The digital age has presented academic communities with many new and productive pathways to interact, publish, and explore. We are less tied to our departments and more connected to colleagues in our fields around the country and world. Much of that is fantastic.

But I would urge us to reflect on what we mean when we refer to "the academic community." For most of us, the bricks-and-mortar community has given us an intellectual and physical home, as well as a commitment to serve our students, our colleagues, and our institutions with integrity and energy. In this era of academic stress, we need to revisit those commitments, and figure out how to become a flesh-and-blood community once again.