



Tim Foley for The Chronicle

I am a proud curmudgeon. Whatever hip new thing you're promoting, I'm probably uninterested. Whatever buzzword you might be enamored of, I probably hate it. And whatever bureaucratic activity you want me to engage in, I almost certainly think it's pointless.

Despite my complete lack of buy-in for whatever you're into, I'm also willing to work hard for my department and students, even if that means jumping through your hoops. I have worked successfully to move policy proposals through the governance system, I've overseen a curriculum overhaul in my department, I've coordinated class schedules, and I have spearheaded a successful effort to expand the number of majors in my department. In those efforts I've cleared numerous bureaucratic hurdles, generated enough paperwork to chop down the Amazon rain forest, and even worked a few buzzwords into some of the paperwork.

So if you're an administrator looking to get this sort of work out of your more curmudgeonly professors, let me offer

you three tips on how to approach people like me.

Make sure the stakes are real, and meaningful to me. If you need me to engage in some reporting exercise because that's what you need to keep your boss off your back, and if you make it clear that I need to do this because you're my boss and you need it, I can certainly do it.

My report might not shine with passion for the latest initiative to link assessable outcomes to the strategic directions identified in the most recent master planning process, and it might not be the most insightful document ever produced, but it will be presentable, it will keep your boss off your back, and it will be delivered on time, because I do my job.

If, on the other hand, you tie this report to a tangible resource that I have a good reason to care about, I might pleasantly surprise you. I might dig deep into data, examine things from multiple angles, and produce a detailed evaluation of plausible scenarios.

Besides providing the right incentives, it also helps if you exhibit genuine interest in something other than the buzzwords that are currently favored in the latest palace gossip from the administration building. Instead, display concern for making things work, expressed in language used by faculty members (not just the jargon used by administrators and bureaucrats at Leadership Development Workshops).

Ask simple questions — like, "What will actually happen if we do this?" or "How will students respond?" or "Do you have enough people to do this for more than a couple years without burnout?" — and I am likely to respond with thoughtful analysis and meaningful plans.

Don't change the rules on me without warning. If you really think that "revamping statements of programmatic objectives in order to better align with a new universitywide initiative" is necessary in order to get our curriculum changes approved, fine, I'll produce the paperwork. That's not hard. It might not be a meaningful thing to do, but it also isn't hard.

However, next week, when I turn it in, don't tell me that you've moved the goalpost. Don't tell me that I'm not getting at the important issue.

Mind you, I understand that people sometimes come to important realizations only after a second look at a problem. It's fine to say (with an apology for not realizing it before I went off and revamped a thick document) that you have thought about it more carefully and you think that there are additional issues to deal with. If you act like a thinking human being, I will probably respond favorably.

Likewise, I understand that you have a boss, and that after our conversation of last week you learned that your boss would be more favorable to a document or plan that followed a different approach than the one that you suggested (in good faith) last week. I understand these things, and I will react in an understanding manner if you evince a bit of an apologetic demeanor when asking me to aim a document or plan at a somewhat different target.

If, however, you act as though the thing that you now want me to do is clearly something that should have been dealt with from the start, I will see you as disingenuous. This isn't 1984. There isn't a "memory hole," and I am well aware that last week you said something entirely different.

Most important, don't try to win me over to your view. Understand that even though I don't buy into your buzzwords and administrivia, I do, in fact, care deeply about students, about how much they learn, and about the future of my department. I'm willing to do what you need — despite the fact that I don't share your perspective — if I see some larger purpose. Just don't try to persuade me to see things your way.

One can care about seeing students succeed without buying into the fashionable lingo of the latest Student Success Initiative or whatever. One can work quite hard (and effectively!) at helping students learn while also thinking that

most top-down assessment exercises are devoid of substance.

I am willing to produce a report full of fashionable jargon in order to persuade people to give us the resources we need to do things for students, but I will recoil if you try to get me to believe that the jargon is meaningful. If you tell me that it's a necessary evil, I will concur and do my job. But try to get inside my head and convert me to your mind-set, and I will resist.

Ultimately, we curmudgeons are straightforward people. We have concrete concerns and goals, and we see most of the jargon and processes of a modern university as obstacles and obfuscations standing between us and our goals. We are willing to do what is needed to accomplish our goals, and work with people who will help us get there — so long as we are treated as concerned and intelligent people who are willing to do good work in spite of not conforming to the herd mentality.

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