

The Geology Department, The Administration, and the Roots of Failure and Success

For the past five years, I have had the privilege to work on the academic administrative staff of the chief academic officer at my university. Over that time, I have been afforded the opportunity to observe a variety of interactions between academic departments and the central administration. These observations have served to solidify previously established personal notions of the characteristics of successful departments as well as to highlight the importance of some things I had not previously considered. The following is a brief description of some of the lessons I have learned about the complexity of relationships between central administration and the academic department.

Commonly, central administration is viewed by the department as a burdensome annoyance, prone to capricious decisions, as the proliferators of useless memoranda and reporting requirements, and on occasion as an entity acting in an actively hostile manner towards the department. I cannot, unfortunately, assure you that in all cases those impressions are false. I can, however, suggest that in most cases such impressions are the product of a myopic appreciation of mission. When I entered into the first of the several positions I have held in the Office of Academic Affairs, many of my friends and colleagues teased me about "joining the dark side." The notion that I had been enticed by the evil empire of academic administration, while generally humorous, could not have been more inaccurate. I felt strongly at the time, and even more strongly now, that academic leadership was an art and a skill not taught to graduate students or junior faculty and it was a skill I desired to attain by trial of fire. So, if central administration is not in fact a malicious troll under the bridge to our future- what is it?

I am of the opinion that academic administration at the university level has five essential duties: the establishment of a core vision; the filtration of the vast volume of rules, regulations, and requirements demanded by state commissions of higher education and accrediting bodies; the synthesis of the wide ranging activities and accomplishments of the various academic units; the source and model of leadership development that will guide the future of the university, and finally the manager of an increasing scarce pool of resources available for sustaining and advancing the mission of the university.

When these duties are accomplished with skill, dedication, honesty, and integrity, the results for any department can only be beneficial. Of course, leadership requires decision making, and no decision of consequence can ever be both universally popular and universally beneficial. None-the-less, I feel strongly that a successful department must approach its dealings with its administration as synergistic collaborations rather than as antagonistic confrontations.

Universities are intrinsically hierarchical in their organization: departments report to schools, schools to colleges, and colleges to the university. The details of this structure, while different at different institutions, share a common characteristic of all hierarchical organizations, the currency of organizational power is information and that information flows through the channels of communication. In my experience, a root cause of success, or failure, for a department, resides in the quality of communication that existed between the department and the higher levels of the academic hierarchy. There are several characteristics of quality communication: honesty, directness, timeliness, completeness, and most importantly the ability to listen. If the lines of communication are not open and if the quality of communication is poor, then information is not readily exchanged, and all decisions are made through a veil of inaccuracy and misinformation. The results of which can become catastrophic for the department.

What responsibilities does a department have to ensure that its communications with the central administration are successful? First, the department must be a skilled receptor of communication. That means listening carefully to the

statements made by the administration and closely reading all written materials distributed. This need not be, however, a totally passive action. Rather, the department should actively engage in the review of academic proposals and drafts of policy documents. The vetting of such materials is an essential aspect of university administration, and central administrators are constantly looking for meaningful, constructive feedback. Second, the department must respond to requests from the administration in a manner that is timely, accurate, and complete. If the administration can come to count on the department to respond to requests for information, data, or documents it goes without saying that a more positive outlook will be developed towards the department and its needs.

The importance of effective teaching to the mission of the geology department can not be overstated. Clearly, everyone understands and agrees that quality teaching is of the highest priority - it is the central mission of all universities. However, the assessment of teaching effectiveness is complex. After all, what is good teaching? There is no single answer to that question. Unfortunately, there exists a commonly held misperception and misapplication of assessment, that is to say, assessment is not evaluation. Importantly, the goal of assessment is the collection of data, not the passing of judgment. As it turns out, it is rather difficult to assess teaching effectiveness; yet, there exists a fairly straight forward process to assess student learning. First, learning outcomes must be clearly articulated. What do you want students to know? Second, an assessment strategy must be established. How will you know if the students learned what you want them to? Third, student learning must be evaluated against an expectation. Was the level of learning they achieved satisfactory?

The ongoing movement towards more extensive and more complete assessment is driven by accrediting bodies and state commissions of higher education. In many states, budget shortfalls are causing state legislatures to begin to ask more detailed and probing questions about the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the higher education process. Departments must learn to respond positively to these demands and use them as a springboard to a better, more effectively delivered, geology degree. One need only look to the intensity of assessment that currently occurs in public primary and secondary schools to see the not too distant future of higher education.

Of the numerous administrative tasks with which geology departments are charged none seem to meet with as high a level of disdain and direct hostility as do processes of programmatic review and strategic planning. These duties often run counter to the philosophy and work habits of many geologists. With increasing frequency, allocation of new and existing university resources is driven by the accreditation requirements of professional and technical programs. As such, geology departments are challenged to justify their continued existence and fight for increasingly scarce resources. The rising tide of retrenchment and budgetary reduction can only be stemmed by serious reflection and well-considered action plans. It is the department's responsibility to align all of its academic and administrative reporting with the universities mission and goals. If the department cannot articulate its mission and priorities within the context of the university strategic plan, it is highly unlikely that adequate resources will flow back to sustain and grow the program. Finally, the department must be able to make a case for itself. What does it mean to be a well-functioning department? Faculty must agree on a set of critical measures of successful performance. Central administration is deeply appreciative of thoughtful, honest self-evaluation. Those departments that can define measures of performance in teaching, research, and service, as well as evaluate the level of performance achieved, will more often than not find that their administration is receptive to discussions of departmental needs.