

JACA

1(1994): 47-49

# More Self-Evident Truths for Departmental Governance

JAMES E. SAYER

**I**N the April 1992 issue of the *ACA BULLETIN*, Dr. Marisue Pickering of the University of Maine at Orono offered her thoughts on “Self-Evident Truths for Departmental Governance” (pp. 56-63). While her analysis was both insightful and interesting, it was not sufficiently inclusive to forewarn potential future chairpersons of the quicksand of departmental leadership. Having just completed five years at the department helm, let me add some thoughts about the pitfalls and problems associated with this lowest-level of academic administration.

## 1. YOU AIN'T ONE OF THE FACULTY NO MORE.

I naively began my chairperson tenure with the thought I would still be seen as a member of the department faculty. In fact, when students would ask about my “lofty” elevation, I always remarked, “I’m still a faculty member; I just now have some administrative responsibilities. But I’m still just one of the faculty.” While I actually believed that and saw myself exactly that way, I discovered quickly that mine was a distinct minority view.

My first realization that I was no longer seen as a regular faculty member came when a colleague, a man with whom I had worked for over ten years, began to call me “Dr. Sayer,” not “Jim.” Now we had been on a first-name basis for so long that I actually had to think to remember his last name! The only time I ever referred to him as “Dr.” was while speaking about him to students, but now he called me “Dr. Sayer” in normal, everyday, face-to-face communication. While I continued to call him by his first name, he persisted in using my title throughout my five-year term as chair.

I also found that it was nearly impossible to have casual, non-significant chats with any of my colleagues. My very presence had a chilling impact upon the “around the coffee pot” dialogues that occurred throughout the day, and I found that I could empty our break room immediately just by walking in. This really hampered my enjoyment of the workplace, because I had loved to banter with my colleagues on every topic from baseball to salary

increases, the whole array of topics about which faculty engage in discussion. However, once I became chair, that avenue of harmless interaction was eliminated.

## **2. YOU ARE THE FIRST AMONG EQUALS.**

Within our department, every member of the faculty is involved in academic and professional advising of our majors, and this is a commitment that includes the chairperson. It soon became apparent, though, that my advice and analysis was better because I happened to be the chair. On more occasions than I can remember during those five years, students would have an advising appointment with me just moments after completing an advising appointment with one of my colleagues. "Wait a minute," I would say, "Didn't you just see Dr. Whoosis this morning?" "Sure did." "Well, then, what can I do for you?" "Since you're the chair, I want to be sure what Dr. Whoosis told me is right." I had that conversation a countless number of times.

## **3. FOR MANY PEOPLE, YOU ARE THE DEPARTMENT.**

Although I was but one person in a department of fourteen, I found that many people, both within and outside the university, treated me as if I were the entire department rolled into one person. "How does your department feel about the new merit pay system?", I was asked. After explaining that we had not yet discussed the matter so I was unable to say how the department felt, I was hit with, "Come on, you're the chair. You are the department. What do you think about the new system?"

That is the kind of question and situation that may prove to be a virtual minefield for new department administrators. After explaining that you, despite being chair, can only speak for yourself in the absence of a departmental position, you must realize that others ALWAYS will assume you DO speak for the department on all matters at all times. While you do not lose your First Amendment freedoms as chair, you do find that they need to be exercised cautiously, for your "freedom of expression" may be interpreted as a gospel statement on behalf of an unaware faculty.

## **4. NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE PETTINESS OF YOUR COLLEAGUES.**

If nothing else, service as department chair can open your eyes to the real world of petty faculty politics in a way unknown and unseen by a "regular" faculty member. I was more than stunned to be confronted by a never-ending series of petty jealousies, matters that never had been discussed in public, nor would they ever be. For example, I shall remember always the female colleague who came into my office, demanding to know why another colleague (a male of inferior academic rank) had "an office with nine more square feet than mine!" Because of her clenched jaw and ruby-red countenance, I realized that my initial desire to laugh would not be appropriate for the occasion, though it was extremely difficult to mask a whimsical grin.

I explained that office assignments were made by the college, not the department. She knew that. I also explained that exterior offices with windows, like hers, were smaller than interior offices without windows, like his. She knew that, too. So, I asked, "What, then, is your question?" Her reply: "I just want to know why his office has nine more square feet than mine." "Because," I said, "His office is larger." She nodded her head and left, forever cognizant of the fact that her colleague's office was larger, but still unaware why his office had more square footage.

During my five-year term, I had faculty complain that others had offices that were "brighter" than theirs, that others had to walk shorter distances to classrooms than they did,

and that others always had “the best advisees.” I often thought how all of us, as children, would see adults act stupidly and vow never to be like that when we grew up. Unfortunately, I found that many of my colleagues had become clones of those stupid and petty adults we found so abhorrent years before.

## **5. EXPECT YOUR EVERY MOVE, EVERY DECISION, TO BE SUSPECT.**

Finally, a new department chairperson must be aware that every move made on behalf of the department, every decision rendered, regardless of its mundane nature, will be scrutinized by your colleagues for selfish intent. I initially made the mistake of assuming everyone would realize my role was to work for the good of the department as a whole, but my naiveté was corrected quickly by murmurings and questions of my “ulterior motives.” This situation may be worsened if there are schisms within your department, splits fostered either by personality differences between individuals, or splits between sub-disciplines, such as organizational folks versus mass communication folks. Then your every move will be assessed in terms of its possibly favoring one side or person over the other.

What makes this problem so difficult with which to contend is the fact that there are natural human alliances you will develop with some people. For a variety of personal, social, and academic reasons, there will be some of your colleagues you would call “friends,” some you would only call “colleagues,” and some you would not want to call at all. However, that very human and natural behavior may be interpreted as your “favoring” some over others, and this is an especially difficult area during a time of concerns over diversity and gender equality.

I tried my best to treat every one of the faculty the same, both personally and professionally, but, in retrospect, I was not successful. I found it very difficult to “cozy up” to someone who misadvised students on a regular basis, who spent more time complaining than accomplishing, and/or who was more concerned about self than the department. Candidly, by the end of my term, I said to hell with those people.

## **CONCLUSION**

Graduate school does not prepare you for service as departmental chairperson, nor do years of service as a regular full-time faculty member. Much of what you need to know and do comes about only with on-the-job training and experience, and, believe me, you will find it to be an experience. My last bit of advice: if you get the urge to become a department chair, sit down and do not move until the feeling passes!

## **REFERENCES AND NOTES**

**James E. Sayer** (Ph.D., Bowling Green State University, 1974) is Professor in the Department of Communication at Wright State University in Dayton OH 45435.