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The Ethos of an Academic Department

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WHILE it would be foolhardy for anyone to suggest what an academic department should be at any time under any circumstances, there are a few general components of credibility which upper-level administrators *expect* from such departments. For the sake of clarity, these components and their characteristics will be discussed from the local (on campus) view and from the cosmopolitan (disciplinary) perspective (Gouldner, 1957-1958).

LOCAL ETHOS

It is fundamental that a department have high credibility on campus. Such ethos is important for faculty members gaining positions on important committees on campus. When departments do not produce research, for example, they are unlikely to have faculty placed on research/graduate school committees. When departments have trouble with their faculty gaining tenure and/or promotion, their faculty members are unlikely to appear on such committees. Faculty in other departments will not elect them, and deans will not appoint them. In addition, financial resources are much more likely to be forthcoming to departments who exemplify an ability to utilize such resources for better teaching and productive research. Third, central administrators are much more likely to attend departmental functions of departments with high credibility. Fourth, when programs are "on the line" and facing elimination, a "weak" department is much more likely to be considered than a strong, credible department.

The three most important components of a credible department are faculty, students, and administrators. Student ethos is obtained and maintained through the quality and quantity of

enrollees in service and major program courses. Faculty ethos is comprised of effective teaching, curriculum maintenance, productive research, and outstanding service. The ethos of the administrator involves timely reports and budgetary vigilance, productive research, teaching excellence as an example for the faculty, innovative goal setting, and leadership in participative decision making.

Students

The quantity of majors and minors is an especially important factor when budget rescissions occur. Such numbers are always important, however. In private schools that are tuition driven, the number of majors and minors might be the sole determinant in maintaining a program. In some instances new faculty are allocated by numbers of majors and minors. In public schools, allocations are often based, at least to some extent, on the number of majors and minors in the department. The criteria for "reasonable" numbers is that class limits be appropriate (different numbers for performance classes, laboratory classes, lecture classes) as well as underlying rationale and that the courses be "filled" (limits be achieved) at least for a majority of the courses.

Departments with few majors but highly-respected professors may fill their upper-level courses with mostly students who are non-majors. However, from time to time, administrators, boards, legislative bodies, and the public-at-large do expect that a program should have a reasonable number of majors. If for no other reason, all faculty should develop a desire for students to become majors through their service courses.

The *quality* of majors is another factor. One's students should be responsible, inquisitive, goal-directed, well prepared, and intelligent. What are the indicators of such factors?

- (1) Students take *required courses* in accordance with high standards. They do not gain *large numbers* of hours through transfer credits; life experience credits; skill oriented, vocational programs; military credit; or other "short-circuit" methods. If courses are not more rigorous than simply reflections of a few experiences, they should not be required.
- (2) Students attend class regularly and on time. Departments encourage responsibility as well as intellect.
- (3) Students attend class having read the assigned material and have questions on the material prepared in advance.
- (4) Student take tests and turn in papers on time.
- (5) Students take prerequisites *before* they take a course.
- (6) Students have as high or higher grades in core courses as in their major courses.
- (7) Students become honor graduates and are initiated into honor societies.
- (8) Some students have learning experiences in other countries, which is encouraged by the departmental faculty.
- (9) About 20% of the graduates attend graduate or professional school.
- (10) Students participate in extracurricular activities that are related to their life goals.

The most obvious way that faculty in other departments recognize the ethos of those in another department is through that department's students. At most institutions, the roll for a class indicates the student's major as well as the name and social security number. Having outstanding students who perform according to the above ten listed factors is the best way to increase one's credibility on campus.

Faculty

First, and most importantly, faculty encourage their student majors to face the challenge of the above criteria regarding student success. Second, faculty must undertake activity in the four areas of teaching, curriculum development, service, and research.

Teaching. Faculty should be prepared to teach five to seven different courses in the department's curriculum. All faculty should teach at least one section of a basic course per year. In relatively small departments (fewer than 15 faculty), faculty should feel equally comfortable at teaching lecture and skills (or laboratory) courses. Faculty should be responsible for their own class attendance. Faculty should be organized so that syllabi are given to students the first day of class. Such preparation serves as a positive example for student responsibility and preparedness. These syllabi should be as complete as possible, including grading criteria and dates of assignments, tests, and papers. Faculty should keep up with the discipline well enough so that class preparation is not a last-minute effort. While textbooks should provide some of the structure of the course, the instructor should not become overly dependent on the textbook. Grades should be fairly and impartially distributed and should be turned in on time. Grade changes should be extremely rare. Generally such changes should be related only to mathematical error. Incomplete grades as assessments should rarely occur as courses should be developed to be completed within the time span of the academic calendar. Emergency situations should serve as exceptions. Courses should be rigorous. Faculty should encourage student inquiry and critical thought. Faculty should encourage their students' "professionalism" so that students and faculty can carry on collegial conversations.

Curriculum Development. Faculty in the department should work together to keep the curriculum updated. In order to perform this task, it is necessary for faculty to read the journals in the field as well as important monographs, especially those published by university presses. In addition, faculty should keep up with the curriculum in other colleges and universities. Keeping the curriculum in step with the times also involves keeping up with technological advancements, theoretical changes, and methodological innovations. For example, departments which do not teach at least some basic elements of computer operation in today's educational system are more than ten years out of date. A credible faculty is also one that considers the deletion of outdated courses as well as the modification of old courses and inclusion of new ones. A review of the curriculum should include service courses as well as courses for majors and minors. Such a review might also include the number of credit hours the course is worth, the prerequisites for the course, the class level at which the course is taught, the catalog description of the course, and the title of the course. Sometimes modifications update a curriculum as much or more so than a new slate. The creation of new ideas can also be established through credit and non-credit courses. New audiences, such as companies and community groups may be found for courses. Curriculum development should be seen as a never-ending process.

Service. Faculty should serve on committees, attend meetings, and complete reports in a timely and responsible manner. Service on committees of lesser importance should be taken with the same enthusiasm as assignments on committees of greater importance.

Research. Faculty should undertake research in their area of expertise, which should be as closely related to the courses taught as is possible. A high level of relationship between the two ensures better teaching and research. A faculty member should have a "program" of research, and after a number of years should become an "expert" in his/her line of inquiry. Eventually faculty should be publishing textbooks in their areas of expertise, thus combining teaching and research areas.

COSMOPOLITAN ETHOS

While graduates will have some impact on the ethos of departments (especially those graduates who go on to graduate school), it is the faculty who are most important to the department's credibility. Usually faculty at other institutions are unaware of the teaching abilities of others. Therefore, research and professional service become the important factors.

Research is essentially the same for the profession as it is on campus. Young faculty may become known in the discipline first through book reviews and/or through the presentation of convention papers. Both, however, should be seen only as significant first steps. As the next step, the researcher should use those works reviewed to publish articles, and convention papers should be reworked into the article format. Peer-refereed regional and national articles become the primary criteria for tenure and promotion to associate professor. After the first promotion, the associate professor should enhance her/his research activities through publishing a book, perhaps based on a series of articles in one's program of research. Even after promotion to professor, a research program should remain a primary agenda item for the professional faculty member. In terms of professional service, faculty should serve on regional and national committees. They should chair such committees, and eventually become chairs of divisions. Finally, they should hold association-wide offices.

DEPARTMENTAL ADMINISTRATION

The chair should be responsible for encouraging faculty and students in the directions mentioned above. The chair should be a pace-setter regarding teaching and research. The chair should encourage faculty with "pats on the back," travel funding, equipment, and other needed resources to complement the factors mentioned above. Chairs should file timely reports so that deans do not have to call or remind. Budgets should be steadfastly adhered to. Innovative approaches to budgets should be established. Chairs should understand the budgetary process of the university. Chairs should be responsible for establishing what constitutes the ethos of the department at a particular institution. As part of this responsibility, the chair should nominate faculty members for teaching and research awards. The chair should see to it that information about articles and books is published in the faculty, alumni, or student newspaper. The chair should serve as a role model in all factors and characteristics of ethos. The chair should communicate well both up and down the line. Whenever possible the chair should not commit faculty without communicating with those concerned and explaining options available. In addition, the chair should be the primary voice in letting the upper level administration know what the goals and needs of the department are. Through such a communication process, the department should be much more effective in achieving its goals as well as the goals of the university. Should all of the players undertake these actions, the ethos of the department should never be held in question. Goal setting of the department should be visualized as a group process which allows for a great deal of innovation in both quantity and quality.

CONCLUSION

Departments should be concerned about their reputation on campus as well as throughout the nation. This reputation, or ethos, is established by the students, the faculty, and the departmental administration. The quantity and the quality of student majors and minors is a primary consideration. Faculty in other departments should begin saying, "The Department of Communication certainly has excellent students." Faculty should develop a reputation for excellence in teaching. Departmental courses should not be seen as low effort or easy

courses. Research should be a mainstay both on campus and off campus. Faculty should develop programs of research so that individual members become experts in their areas of expertise. Department chairs should develop reputations for budgetary vigilance both with their superiors and their departmental colleagues. Chairs should ensure that the public is aware of the accomplishments of their departments. Finally, chairs should serve as excellent examples for faculty in their own departments as well as other departments. Using these aspects of ethos, departments become well known for their excellence.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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