

Campus Culture



What Conspiracy?

It has become a cliché among professors to speak of power relations within the university setting in adversarial terms—as a matter of “us” (the faculty) versus “them” (by which is usually meant all administrators from the lowliest department head to the university president).

Chairs, deans, provosts, vice presidents, and presidents are lumped together in a monolithic cabal—“the administration”—all the members of which are thought to operate with lockstep consistency, presumably to advance some identical (but unspoken) agenda.

In fact, it is not unusual to hear faculty members use the language of conspiracy to characterize a campus squabble:

A colleague of mine on the West Coast once informed me that her administration had set out to “destroy” the faculty and to replace all tenure-track professors with adjuncts.

Another colleague insists that his department head and “all the other administrators” are working to turn faculty members into nothing more than 40-hour-a-week workers who soon will be required, if not to punch a time clock, at least to account for their time on the job.

A dean in the Southeast complained that the faculty in one of her departments refused to adopt a curricular change that would have revitalized the department simply because she had been the first to champion the change; the faculty claimed to be “wary of top-down management.”

Such sentiments express a range of quite genuine frustrations in higher education now—a time marked by tight budgets, increased governmental and corporate interference, and a distinctly consumerist attitude on the part of students and their parents. Nonetheless, depicting campus administrators as participants in some organized conspiracy against faculty members is unproductive.

It also obscures the fact that in most cases we administrators share the exact same values and goals as faculty members; we just inhabit different roles and have very different day-to-day concerns. Most administrators hold faculty rank. Do you really think our to-do list reads: dismantle tenure, eliminate academic freedom, turn professors into automatons?

The “us versus them” rhetoric obscures the complexity of academic leadership. But it is easy to conjure up a conspiracy if you are unfamiliar with the facts—namely, that in any university of any size (and probably in every institution, regardless of size), the administration is composed of a collection of individuals each of whom represents a distinct constituency and an academic unit replete with its own specific mission, goals, and needs.

By definition, the mission, goals, and needs of an academic unit are necessarily in competition with those of other units. Each unit will compete for what it sees as its portion of the pie to support its own unique agenda. Coming to terms with that dynamic is essential to understanding academic leadership and developing a much-needed culture of trust in higher education.

Everyone understands, for example, that within a college, each department competes directly and by design with other departments for the same pool of resources. Whether it be the opportunity to hire a new faculty member, increase the operating budget, upgrade computers or scientific instruments, or expand the number of graduate assistantships, some formal process of proposal and justification usually will be put in play.

The dean’s office, guided by a faculty committee, is then charged with sorting through the proposals and determining which ones to support. It is entirely appropriate for each department to be asked to make a compelling argument as to why it should receive the resources rather than some other department.

Clearly, in that scenario the department heads are hardly in collusion with one another against the faculty. In fact, their job is to serve as the principal advocates for their department’s faculty, staff, and programs. Nor in that scenario are the department heads in cahoots with the dean, since the dean’s job is to sort through the many worthy proposals and make the

difficult choice about which of them will best advance the college's mission and goals.

In a similar vein, a dean competes directly and by design with the deans of other colleges for the same pool of resources. Well before the academic departments engage in a process of proposal and justification, the colleges will have done the same; and the provost—like the dean on the college level—will need to weigh the many worthy requests.

Should the institution put a much-needed infusion of cash into the library, invest in a new doctoral program in the college of education, support a new law review in the law school, or finance an initiative to increase SAT scores of incoming students by spending more on student recruitment?

To imagine the department heads, the deans, and the provost in a relationship of conspiracy is to fail to notice that every administrator is preoccupied with defending and advocating for his or her own unit—more often than not over and against other units and their administrators.

And the competition doesn't end (or begin) in academic affairs. The identical dynamic is in play at the vicepresidential level, too. Well before the provost opens up the formal competition for resources within academic affairs, the university president will have opened up a similar process among the vice presidents of student affairs, academic affairs, finance, advancement, and the like. Deteriorating residence halls will do battle with parking problems, campus security, aging buildings, computer systems, and athletic programs, among many other competing priorities. What's more, the president's main priority may be completely different from those of the vice presidents.

Throughout the long process of negotiation at all of those different levels, some administrators may well be ineffective advocates. We administrators do not always make the wisest decisions. Some observers may misconstrue that ineffectiveness or injudiciousness as a lack of support or, worse, as evidence of a concerted conspiracy against faculty or staff interests.

But interpreting ineffective advocacy or bad decision-making as active obstruction is to forget the academic leader's *raison d'être*: to serve as the chief advocate for his or her unit.

Is the process of proposal, justification, and advocacy agonistic? Yes, somewhat, but it is also healthy: Each unit within the institution should be able to justify the good things it has to offer and to make a cogent case as to why they should be supported. That process keeps us all from growing stagnant and taking our programs—academic and otherwise—for granted. It helps us keep in focus why we have devoted our lives to academe in the first place.

Administrators may well find themselves in agreement from time to time on one issue or another, but the fact is that any institution is composed of a number of self-contained (though interrelated) areas, and each leader will be busy making the best case possible for his or her area.

Far from a grand us-versus-them conspiracy, the scenario you will find without fail in every institution will be the same: Each administrator arguing vociferously and tenaciously for his or her faculty, staff, and programs. You personally will not be present each time that advocacy takes place, but you can rest assured that it is happening nonstop. It is impossible for an institution to thrive otherwise.



Avoiding Academe's Ax Murderers

Many years ago when I directed a doctoral program in my discipline, I invited a celebrated scholar to hold a daylong “master class” for a select number of senior graduate students. He lectured for a few hours and then opened the session to questions. “Dr. Famous,” one student asked, “what do we need to know to survive our first year as assistant professors?”

A notorious *enfant terrible*, our mischievous guest stunned everyone with his reply: “Remember that every department has at least one ax murderer, but you won’t know in advance who it is so you’d better be on your guard.”

While our guest was clearly playing to his audience for a laugh, he was also articulating what has become a lamentable fact of faculty life: Many academics regularly engage in a kind of “gotcha” politics.

The propensity to pounce ruthlessly on a politically wounded colleague is rapidly becoming a favorite spectator sport in academe. I am continually astonished by the gusto with which some faculty members will leap to attack a colleague at the slightest hint of an allegation of misconduct, even when the accused is a close friend. Or by how vigorously some department chairs will initiate proceedings against a faculty member when informal discussions might have resolved the issue in question.

Over the years, I have served on or presided over inquiry panels convened to determine whether a complaint against a professor had merit.

Invariably there would be a point in the proceedings—usually early on and before all the evidence had been considered—when some faculty member would pronounce indignantly that the accused was clearly guilty and that we should recommend the maximum penalty available. “He most certainly made an offensive remark in class; he should be suspended for at least a semester.” Or, “She undoubtedly falsified her research results; she should be stripped of all future institutional support.” Or, “This is clearly plagiarism; he should be fired immediately.”

Although such pronouncements were always made solemnly, I could not help but detect a certain underlying glee—the kind you might find when a parent catches a child misbehaving.

When guilt is assigned before all the evidence and perspectives are heard, when the verdict is swift but premature, and when the recommended penalty is the most draconian available, we have entered the zone of gotcha politics. That zone has no room for judicious deliberation, reasoned debate, or compassion—which makes it especially out of place in an institution that has historically prided itself on championing reason, deliberation, and justice.

Undoubtedly, predatory behavior in the academic world is a convenient means of crippling or eliminating rivals. Why not accelerate your opponents’ demise by advocating strenuously against them if the opportunity presents itself?

A business dean told me that one of his faculty members had become convinced that a popular associate professor regularly altered his teaching evaluations by slipping into the department late at night after students had returned their evaluation forms and removing any negative ones. The incensed colleague mounted a vigorous campaign against the associate professor, whose reputation was ruined in the process. Everyone in the college believed he was guilty. As it turned out, an extensive investigation proved conclusively that the professor was innocent; no tampering had occurred whatsoever.

The same people who are quick to ascribe guilt are often the first to violate confidentiality and fuel the engine of gossip and innuendo, which can, in effect, render irrelevant any official finding in the case. An individual may be exonerated in the end but found guilty in the popular imagination.

A favorite gambit of those who engage in such vicious politics is to enlist a student—preferably a graduate student—to do their dirty work. They will urge the student to file a complaint against a rival or spread malicious gossip. In fact, it is not uncommon to discover after some scrutiny

that a student's letter of complaint against a professor was actually penned by another professor.

Gotcha politics are particularly brutal when they involve anonymity. A number of my fellow deans across the country tell me they are continually shocked by the viciousness with which some faculty members attack their chairs in end-of-year written evaluation surveys. Some evaluations contain abusive diatribes and preposterous allegations, all based on the flimsiest of evidence (or just on gossip).

University administrators regularly receive anonymous letters purporting to reveal some grievous act by a faculty member: This one has plagiarized; that one is sleeping with students; another is misusing grant money. Rarely does the anonymous revelation provide specific facts and details, much less do so in a coolly objective tone. More often it takes the form of a rant with little specificity.

The ever-increasing influence of blogs has exacerbated the problem. Blogs foster a culture of anonymity and unchecked expression without accountability. Bloggers can write whatever they want, regardless of the damage to others, and they can do so fully protected by the cloak of secrecy. In some universities, blogs dedicated to unseating the institution's president have proved quite effective. In response, some university presidents have instituted their own blogs and have made them easily accessible from the institution's Web site.

The kind of predatory politics I am describing thrive on righteous indignation and, as such, are self-serving: If you are in a position to renounce some perceived indiscretion or act of wrongdoing, then you can feel—at least to yourself—morally superior. No need to consider possible extenuating circumstances or alternate interpretations of the facts. After all, you have the high ground.

Perhaps the most extreme form of gotcha politics is the phenomenon recently dubbed “mobbing,” in which a group of people collectively set out to damage or destroy a colleague's reputation. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has reported fairly extensively on this trend and has detailed several cases in which professors and administrators have fallen prey to mob action.

We all have the right—indeed, the obligation—to point out potential misconduct when we become aware of it. Improper behavior needs to be identified and halted. But dealing with that behavior does not require ad hominem attack, abusive language, unsubstantiated allegations, or wolf-pack savagery.

It's not criticism that is in question; it's the tone and style of it.

Obviously, there is no way to legislate against gotcha politics or to prevent it by fiat. The only way to put an end to such incivility is for each of us to resolve not to be a party to such unprofessional behavior. It is in your own best interest to do so. After all, you never know when you might become the ax murderer's next target.



How to Get What You Want in Academe

Professors may be among the most highly educated members of society, but when it comes to negotiating our daily professional relationships, we sometimes seem to check our intelligence at the door. Ostensibly the bastion of reasoned and collegial discourse, academe is often plagued by inexcusably rude and uncollegial behavior.

At a recent professional meeting, a department chairman described being yelled at by a faculty member disgruntled over not being assigned to teach a favorite course.

"I was flabbergasted," the chairman said. "This newly promoted associate professor hollered at me right out in the busy hallway as if I were a misbehaving child." He was especially annoyed because the complainant had chosen to adopt an adversarial tone from the outset. "The scene in the hallway was not the culmination of a long discussion or debate," the chairman said. "He simply acted out from the get-go."

It was a department chairman who did the shouting in another recent incident I know of, yelling at the dean of his graduate school because of the dean's newly imposed restrictions on doctoral-defense committees. The dean reported the incident to the chairman's academic dean, who sighed and responded, "Yes, he often behaves badly, especially when things don't go his way."

On occasion, such outbursts even escalate to the next level. I worked at a university where a fistfight once erupted between two faculty members in a department meeting. While such scuffles are rare, the fact that they happen at all illustrates the depth of passion—and, at times, ill will—that can dwell just below the surface of many a department.

An elderly professor emeritus was so disillusioned by the rancor in her former department that she told me she would not seek work as a professor

today if she were a newly graduated Ph.D. “I became a professor because I wanted to live the life of the mind,” she said, “not the life of a pugilist.”

Students, unfortunately, are contributing to our culture of incivility. Professors and administrators report more and more incidents of students acting out in verbally abusive ways. The term “grade dispute” used to refer to a reasoned weighing of facts and evidence; now it seems to suggest a diatribe.

E-mail has exacerbated the situation. Tone is difficult to regulate in e-mail under normal circumstances, but the likelihood of producing an intemperate message rises exponentially once someone feels wronged or believes that some injustice has been perpetrated. I can’t count the number of times I’ve witnessed individuals firing off inappropriate e-mails in a fit of pique—messages that could only be described as “screaming in print.” I suspect that more often than not the authors of those immoderate messages would be shocked at the viciousness of their own prose if they could only step back and read them from the perspective of the recipient.

The culture of incivility is ubiquitous. All one need do is peruse discussion forums for academics and their countless blogs to see how much reasoned, intelligent discourse has eroded and is being replaced by mean-spirited name calling and finger pointing.

What’s more, people don’t seem to consider the consequences of their bad behavior. I know of a small group of faculty members who waged a vicious attack on their chairwoman over a decision she made affecting their area of study. Two weeks later, the group’s ring leader petitioned the chairwoman for her “moral and financial support” of a new project he wanted to start on the campus.

“I thought I’d entered the twilight zone,” she told me. “He acted as if the attack of a few weeks earlier had never happened and now we were supposed to become bosom buddies.”

One serious consequence of incivility is that you can permanently damage your reputation in an institution after only a few incidents of hotheadedness. A professor I know was interested in trying his hand at administrative work, and even exhibited a fair amount of talent as a potential administrator, but officials in his institution refused to appoint him to such positions because he had developed a reputation as a “crank” after firing off multiple angry e-mail messages to his department colleagues (and copying the president) over the years.

“We will never consider him for a position of responsibility in the university,” his dean told me. “He can’t be trusted to demonstrate good judgment.”

If you really want to accomplish your goals in the academic setting, then honey, not vinegar, is the key. No injustice, however great; no personal affront, however offensive; no decision, however wrongheaded, can justify abusive discourse—be it in print, in person, or in public.

In my experience, there's always a way to resolve a disagreement in a professional and courteous manner. Here are a few best practices:

- Assume from the start that your audience has good intentions unless proven otherwise. Doing so allows you to operate in a positive atmosphere. Adopting an adversarial approach, or assuming some conspiracy is afoot against you, only causes both sides to dig in their heels.
- Demonstrate a willingness to compromise, or at least to consider alternatives to your position. Even if, at the end of the day, you don't give ground on an issue, showing that you are willing to consider alternatives helps create a more positive and productive atmosphere.
- Avoid a win-at-all-costs logic. Are you willing to suffer the consequences of your winning the dispute at hand? Some battles are not worth losing the war over. The colleague you are opposing today may be the very person whose support you will need in the future. Calling that person an unpleasant name (however good it feels in the moment) may alienate him or her forever.
- Avoid screaming in print. By carefully monitoring your tone, especially when communicating about sensitive topics, you can prevent doing serious damage to your cause. Before you hit "send," step away from the keyboard and give yourself time to think.
- Better yet, deal with sensitive issues face to face or by phone—not by e-mail. If an issue is genuinely important to you, why jeopardize it by communicating via a medium that is notorious for creating misunderstanding and bad feeling? Direct communication shows respect for the other person at the same time that it emphasizes the importance of your request or position.

Ultimately, those tips are about protecting your reputation. It's much better to be known as diplomatic and judicious than as hostile and contentious.

I am not suggesting that we refrain from speaking out strongly, defending a position, or opposing a policy when necessary. Adversaries need to be opposed, bullies put in their place, abhorrent policies overturned, new policies championed. That is part of the daily work of academe.

And, yes, malevolent people do exist, as do conspiracies. But assuming the worst of people independent of corroborating evidence is, at best, counterproductive and, at worst, part of the problem.

Maybe you don't believe that academe should serve as a model of civility for the larger society. So consider it an issue of self-interest—civility and collegiality are key to helping you get your way in academe.



That's *Your* Opinion

Not long ago, a scholar of postmodern thought taught an honors seminar on the French philosopher Michel Foucault to a class of juniors. Twenty minutes into her explanation of his theory of discourse, one of the students sneered, "Well, that's his opinion. I don't agree."

Stunned, the professor explained that, given the fact that the class had only just begun reading the philosopher's work, the first task was neither to agree nor to disagree but to understand exactly what was being argued. Agreement or disagreement was a privilege earned only after having mastered and reflected on the material.

Annoyed, the student replied, "Everyone is entitled to an opinion, and my opinion is that he is wrong."

Clearly, that undergraduate was in no position to contribute in any meaningful way to an evaluation of Foucault's thought—especially since the student had only been introduced to the material a week earlier. Yet, in one definitive statement he had dismissed the thought of one of the world's most celebrated postmodern thinkers.

The student's peremptory dismissal—"Well, that's his opinion"—is not an aberration. That assertion and the attitude it embodies have become endemic, not only in society at large but in academe. Apparently, nowadays

an opinion will trump a fact, a reasoned argument, an empirically verified observation—even a treatise by an eminent scholar. An opinion is the great equalizer, and everyone has one. It silences all arguments, squelches all dialogue: That's your opinion. End of discussion.

Even faculty members and administrators are not immune from that inherently anti-intellectual attitude.

Each semester, a department head I know at a private four-year college observes classes taught by faculty members on the tenure track. The object is to help them improve their teaching and strengthen their case for tenure and promotion. In each case, the chairwoman completes an "observation checklist," recording specifics of what she observed in the classroom (for example, whether the instructor answered students' questions). Then she prepares a written evaluation based on the checklist.

In her evaluation of an inexperienced assistant professor, the chairwoman pointed to several practices that she had observed in his classroom and suggested that his teaching would improve if he discontinued them. Rather than accept—or even ponder—the well-intentioned advice, the young instructor disputed the evaluation altogether, contending that teaching is an art and everyone has his or her own style. In effect, he told her, "That's your opinion."

I also know of a college dean who was removed from office and disciplined for fiscal mismanagement. He explained to a reporter for the campus newspaper that he really hadn't done anything wrong; it was all a matter of "interpretation" of the facts. He pledged to offer the "other side" of the story sometime in the near future. The "fact" that the college was tens of thousands of dollars in the red seemed immaterial.

We seem to be witnessing the apotheosis of opinion, a trend that has grave consequences for all of us in higher education. A generation of students and others are training themselves not to become critical thinkers, not to search for evidence or support of an assertion, and not to hold themselves or others accountable for the assertions they make.

A major challenge for higher education in the years to come will be to ensure that logic, critical thinking, close reading, the scientific method, and the spirit of inquiry in general don't become lost arts—lost to the imperative of opinion.

This widespread trend affects academe in ways that are not always immediately apparent. For example, it seems reasonable to posit a connection between the increased level of litigation in academe and the insistence that everything can be reduced to an opinion.

College officials are reporting record numbers of lawsuits, many of which are frivolous. Tenure denials have become susceptible to lengthy legal challenges, even when there is a preponderance of evidence that the complainants clearly did not meet the institution's stated requirements. Some candidates for faculty positions have sued institutions because, in their opinion, they were more qualified than the individuals who had been appointed. Doctoral candidates have sued their major professors over whether their dissertations were ready for defense. And provosts are being sued over even the most minor personnel decisions, from the appointment of part-time instructors to the selection of teaching-award recipients.

As the climate in academe becomes one where opinions carry special weight, many people are finding it all too easy to challenge administrative decisions. If you believe your opinion is just as valid as the decision of the committee that recommended appointing someone other than you to a position, then you may well feel entitled to challenge the recommendation. To you that committee's decision is nothing more than another opinion.

Many academic administrators are attempting to counter the trend. More and more institutions are strengthening critical-thinking components of the general-education curriculum. Department heads and program directors are making a special effort to encourage classroom instructors to teach students how to distinguish between what is mere opinion and what the discipline considers to be a stronger truth claim.

But the glorification of opinion is not merely a curricular issue, since professors, staff members, and administrators fall prey to the same temptation. One way that administrators can help curb the ever-increasing influence of unsupported opinion is to ensure that all stakeholders understand exactly how administrative decisions are made.

Transparency and effective communication about how decisions are made will demonstrate that a formal process is in play, show how that process works, and explain why a particular decision was made. Increased transparency will not satisfy everyone, but people will find it that much harder to argue with decisions when decision-making processes are clearly articulated and available for all to scrutinize.

I am not suggesting that the world is black and white and that we should always expect to arrive at certainty in any given dispute, or that there will always be one individual who possesses the truth or who has some privileged access to "reality." Rather, I am suggesting that in academic settings (if not everywhere else) truth claims should be expected to be supported by something stronger than a "feeling" or intuition.

Even “informed opinions”—judgments based on a substantive analysis of a subject—are acceptable. What is not acceptable in academic disputes (as opposed to, say, elementary school disagreements during recess) is the facile termination of dialogue with “That’s *your* opinion.”

Nor am I suggesting that people should not pursue legitimate grievances against their institutions, although when we believe that all opinions are created equal, we may be tempted to forget that university officials can make perfectly reasonable decisions that don’t happen to go our way.

What I am suggesting is that while the apotheosis of opinion is a broad social problem, those of us in higher education—especially in administrative posts—should take the lead in demonstrating that all opinions are decidedly not equal. That’s exactly why we in the academic world exist in the first place: to sift through multifarious data and perspectives and arrive at reasoned conclusions.

But then again, that’s only *my* opinion.



Holding Ourselves Accountable

For at least two decades, we’ve spent a lot of time talking about “accountability” in higher education. As with so many things in academe, the concept means different things to different people.

What comes to mind first are the continued calls from state and federal officials for uniform standards and methods of assessing student learning. But the culture of accountability in academe involves much more than that, and has taken on the form of a movement.

The appeals for state or national standards are the most well known and have sparked considerable debate. A case in point: the call by the U.S. Department of Education’s Spellings Report for specific national standards for student performance and a process for accurately measuring that performance. Most faculty members and administrators agree that establishing and maintaining standards is a healthy process. It makes sense to create metrics to judge how effective courses, programs, and institutions have been in reaching those standards.

The problem, according to many, arises when nonexperts—people from outside of the academic disciplines—are the ones responsible for

devising standards for the experts within the discipline. In many states, legislatures or boards of education have imposed stringent reporting requirements on universities in order to monitor one thing or another, and not just issues related to affordability, access to education, or assessment of student achievement.

I recall one governor who publicly proclaimed that his state's public universities were "fat" and "top heavy" with administrators. He then mandated that the universities reduce their ratio of administrators to other employees by a certain percentage—this despite the fact that the actual ratios varied widely from institution to institution.

Notwithstanding his unsophisticated attempt to solve the problem (imposing a one-size-fits-all solution with no sensitivity to the unique contexts of different institutions), the governor nonetheless had a point. He was, in effect, suggesting that universities with bloated administrations were not being sufficiently accountable to the citizens of the state.

As public institutions, we have a responsibility to ensure that we are using public money prudently and not wastefully. Especially in tough fiscal times, taxpayers have a right to know that their money in all sectors of government is under responsible stewardship.

In fact, responsible and ethical fiscal management is a key area of the accountability movement within higher education. Early in this decade, Illinois instituted a mandatory online ethics course that all state employees—including university faculty members, staff employees, and administrators—must take annually. Although the course covers several topics (it varies from year to year), its main focus is on the proper management of state resources, both ethically and legally—avoiding conflicts of interest of all sorts, such as claiming reimbursements you are not entitled to; awarding contracts to friends and family members; and using department telephones, computers, and e-mail accounts to conduct personal business.

To enhance fiscal accountability, many institutions are tightening their own internal controls over the acquisition and flow of money. At my own university, for instance, we have prohibited the use of state-appropriated dollars to purchase personal (not departmental) memberships, like dues for the Rotary Club or professional organizations, and personal subscriptions to magazines and journals.

We have also strengthened our controls over the use of state money for certain types of travel as well as for food and entertainment. While grant and foundation accounts may be used for a wider range of such expenditures, state-appropriated dollars are closely scrutinized so that the university

can always demonstrate that it is a responsible steward. Our new measures were originally triggered by the state's dire fiscal condition, but they were adopted primarily to increase fiscal accountability campuswide.

Another often-overlooked form of accountability relates to disciplinary actions. In academe's "good old boy" past, supervisors and department heads often would ignore infractions of university rules, or privately direct the transgressor to halt the offending behavior. Over the years, I have witnessed a shocking degree of laxity in such matters. I've heard department heads dismiss unethical, unprofessional, or occasionally illegal behavior because, "after all, we're all colleagues," or because, as a former chair once told me, "rocking the boat would cause more trouble than it's worth." I've seen the same negligence among supervisors toward their staff members.

In those cases, ignoring improper conduct, or simply exhorting someone privately to behave, was in lieu of what proper practice dictates: documenting the incident so that if future infractions occur, appropriate disciplinary action can be taken. Documenting improper behavior is an important form of accountability—it demonstrates that the institution takes its own rules and policies seriously and will hold all employees equally accountable for adhering to them.

Staff supervisors, department heads, and other administrators have a responsibility to hold an employee accountable; that is an inherent part of their jobs. A department chair can reprimand a faculty member, if the circumstances call for it, while still remaining a colleague. The personal should never cloud the professional in such situations.

Similarly, the annual performance evaluations of university staff members and administrators is another area in which lax habits are giving way to much more professional practices. I have known supervisors who would consistently fail to document areas of improvement in annual evaluations of their employees because they hoped to avoid conflict or wanted to be thought of as magnanimous.

That practice is unfair to the staff members because it robs them of the opportunity to improve. What's more, failing to document areas for improvement could prove awkward if the relationship were to sour, or if the employee were later to become a "problem." There would be no documented history of the staff member's actual performance.

In recent years, colleges and universities, independent of external pressure, have begun to institute sweeping measures to hold themselves and their faculty and staff members accountable in a number of areas, so much so that "increased accountability" has become a badge of pride for some

colleges. That is why the Voluntary System of Assessment (VSA) program has become so popular. VSA was jointly developed by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities as a way for state institutions to demonstrate accountability both internally and to the public at large.

It is typical now for universities to display in their literature that they are committed to accountability in all areas of their operations. That is a far cry from the practices in academe only a few decades ago.

Our increased commitment to accountability has led to more deliberate, defensible, and professional decision-making. Specifically, it has highlighted the necessity of making data-driven rather than seat-of-the-pants decisions, much less ideologically driven ones. Becoming genuinely accountable means being able to demonstrate that decisions derive from specific facts, not from anecdote, impression, gut feeling, personal agenda, or ideology. It entails fostering a culture of evidence within the institution, which has led, in turn, to the increased importance of involving information-technology and institutional-research departments in key decisions.

Recently I was invited to participate on a panel of experts in information technology and institutional research about the importance of data-driven decision making in strategic planning. The consensus was that having sufficient access to the right data enables universities to make more sophisticated, fine-grained decisions and to demonstrate the rationales behind them.

Clearly, “accountability” in academe can refer to a vast array of attempts to become transparent and open in decision-making processes. Whether it is an attempt by curricular programs to illustrate that they are truly delivering what they promised, or an effort by academic departments (or entire institutions) to demonstrate that their students really are acquiring the skills and knowledge demanded by their disciplines, or measures taken by institutions to tighten their fiscal controls, the answer to “Why accountability?” is this: Because we have a responsibility as public stewards to answer for the trust we have been given.



If Universities Were Democracies

If universities were democracies, then students would always have their way, since they are invariably the largest constituent group in any institution.

Undoubtedly, grades would be abolished, classes would be optional, and the curriculum would be a matter of student choice.

In this democracy, every semester would occasion a vote of confidence (or no confidence) in every professor by the students. And the vote would be more than symbolic; it would have consequences.

Of course, if universities were democracies, then staff members would exercise considerable influence over how the institution was run, since next to students they typically comprise the largest constituent group. We might imagine a thirty-hour work week, substantial annual pay increases at the expense of other university priorities, and—almost certainly—free parking.

Then, of course, there are the alumni. Most universities these days are quite proactive in cultivating their alumni as a powerful force in making recommendations about the direction of the institution. In fact, the alumni boards of many universities have become especially influential advisory bodies helping to shape the institution's progress.

Although alumni are not usually part of the daily operation of the institution in the way that faculty, staff, and students are, they nonetheless constitute a very powerful constituency. Numerically, the alumni at any institution vastly outnumber all other constituent groups, including students. So if universities were democracies, then the alumni would have the greatest say in how things are run.

While I don't know any students, staff, or alumni who believe that universities are democracies, I have known faculty who believe just that. A business dean once told me about an incident at her institution that illustrates this belief. She had spent two years cultivating a potential donor to make a multimillion dollar gift to the college. She finally succeeded in securing a gift that would result in the college being named in honor of the wealthy donor.

When she announced the good news at a college-wide faculty meeting, she was astonished at the response of a few faculty members: they insisted that the dean submit the plan to name the college to a faculty vote. The dean was especially shocked because there was nothing controversial about the donor; he was a prominent community leader and philanthropist.

"Do you mean to tell me that we potentially might vote not to accept this huge, generous gift?" she asked the group incredulously.

One of the faculty members replied, "It's our college, and we should together make decisions like this—in a popular vote."

Needless to say, the dean declined the request to submit the plan to a vote. She told the group that she would be happy to receive input from anyone who wanted to write to her about the plan, and she certainly would

take that input into consideration, but the decision itself was the responsibility of the dean, the vice president for advancement, and, ultimately, the president.

At another university, the faculty senate attempted to pressure the administration to alter a proposed response to state-imposed budget cuts. The senate objected to a number of academic program closures in the plan and preferred instead that the institution jettison its underperforming football program. The senate leadership attempted to initiate a “vote of the faculty” as to what the institution’s approach to the cuts should be—this despite the fact that most faculty possessed very little information about the inner workings of the athletics program or the university’s long-term planning.

It is one thing for faculty to vote on curricular change, or a new tenure policy—although even a vote on these subjects should be understood to be not the final word, but just one recommendation among others. It is quite another matter to vote on whether the institution should close a campus street to traffic in order to create a pedestrian mall, or establish a satellite campus in an adjacent town, or dip into its emergency reserve fund in order to help cover a state-mandated budget cut. These are typically decisions that derive from an institution’s long-term master plan and are the purview of multiple constituencies—not just one. Yet these are all areas that faculty at some institutions have attempted to control.

What’s more, in scenarios such as these, a constituency is often being asked to vote on a plan about which it typically does not have a full grasp of the facts and despite the fact that the decision affects multiple constituencies, yet invariably the voting constituency will nonetheless feel that its vote should be binding.

Perhaps the belief that all important university decisions should be subjected to a faculty vote derives from a misunderstanding of what “shared governance” is. Some faculty members believe that shared governance quite literally means that a committee or other group or the faculty as a whole votes on a proposed plan and that’s it—the plan gets implemented.

A dean once told me that a faculty leader at her institution informed her that shared governance means that “the faculty run the university” and the role of administrators is to “do the daily paperwork.” “He said, in all seriousness, that the faculty have the primary role of governing the university and that administrators are appointed to spare them from the more distasteful managerial labor,” said the dean.

Shared governance, at least in the context of American higher education, is a product of the 1960s when colleges and universities began to

liberalize many of their processes. In fact, the foundational statement on the subject, “Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities,” was published in the mid 1960s by the American Association of University Professors, the American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

Prior to the 1960s, it was not unusual for administrators to make decisions unilaterally, without consulting faculty or other constituents. The movement toward greater shared governance was an attempt to give campus constituencies more opportunity to participate in the decision making process—not to exercise veto power through votes or other means, but to be able to provide recommendations that might help influence the final decision.

Clearly, there is a substantial difference between providing input, advice, and recommendations, on the one hand, and conducting a vote, on the other. Genuine shared governance entails the appropriate constituencies’ engaging in reasoned dialogue and debate over an issue before providing recommendations to the administration through their representatives.

In contrast, subjecting every important decision to a popular vote invites constituents to weigh in on issues without having studied the facts or having heard the perspectives of other constituencies—as, presumably, their elected representatives have. It would in effect mean rule by a simple majority—mob rule, rather than true shared governance.

This is not to suggest that votes are inappropriate in the university setting. Handled professionally they can serve as a barometer of a constituency’s collective feeling at the time of the vote. This should not be confused, however, with the workings of shared governance.

The fact is, universities are not democracies; they are complex organizations comprising multiple constituencies all of whom contribute advice from their unique perspectives. If universities really were democracies where every important decision was subjected to a vote, they would be ungovernable.



Creating a Culture of Respect

Back when I was new to the profession, I witnessed a senior professor shouting loudly at a departmental secretary in a busy hallway. The professor,

a rather large man, stood face to face as he barked at the petite woman. He was obviously out of control, accusing her of misplacing a page of an original manuscript that she had been typing for him.

While that type of abusive tirade is, fortunately, uncommon in academe—and was just as rare then—many of us may be guilty of failing to treat administrative staff members with the full respect they deserve.

A senior scholar and prominent feminist admitted to me that as a junior faculty member, she had habitually treated office-staff members as if they were her personal assistants. “I would simply hand a test to the secretary and say, ‘I’ll need this by 3 this afternoon,’” she told me sheepishly. She realizes now that she must have seemed abrupt and condescending: “I didn’t mean to be rude or unfriendly; I was just task-oriented.”

An office manager in an academic department even told me that the faculty members had voted to exclude (she used the word “ban”) staff employees from departmental meetings. Although she had worked in the department “longer than just about every single professor,” she was treated as if she were not a full member—and an essential one at that, since she managed the budget and was the only one with a thorough grasp of university policies and procedures.

“I’ve broken in six chairmen in my time here,” she said. “But only one of them ever made me feel that he appreciated all that I’ve done.”

Those incidents illustrate a kind of inequity that continues to exist in academe despite the influence of progressive thinking about issues of socioeconomic class and cultural hierarchies: Some of us treat staff members as the second-class citizens of our departments.

Certainly times have changed, and there is considerably more sensitivity than there was a few decades ago. No longer do we think of sending the office manager out to pick up our dry cleaning. But the residue of that patronizing approach persists in some departments.

We all know faculty members and administrators who regularly chastise or snap at office workers, speak to them in a condescending tone, or treat them as if they were invisible, excluding them from departmental activities and functions. One staff member told me that some faculty members in her department—including the chair—regularly speak to her as if she were a child, even though she is older than most of them.

Why that disrespect persists is hard to determine. It’s often said that administrators and faculty members seem to think they are the only ones in the university. Perhaps we get too wrapped up in our own daily work and forget those who are hired to assist us. Perhaps some academics feel that