



EXAMINING FACULTY— ADMINISTRATIVE RELATIONSHIPS: LOOKING AT THE RESEARCH

Susan Awbrey

In a national survey of full-time faculty only 54 percent of respondents were satisfied with the relationship between faculty and administration at their institutions (Birnbaum, 1992). More recent surveys put faculty dissatisfaction with university governance above 70 percent (Ehara, 1998; Kezar, 2004). It appears that many faculty members think that administrators don't respect academic values and many administrators think that faculty members don't understand the role administration plays in the life of the institution. What has led to this situation, and what can be done about it? This article attempts to add clarity to the discussion by examining relevant research. It expands deliberation to include consideration of what might lead to better understanding and hence to better relationships between faculty and administrators. The discussion begins with examination of the social context of higher education.

Several authors have noted that faculty autonomy and influence increased in the United States from the 1940s through the 1960s (e.g., Baldrige, Curtis, Ecker, & Riley 1973; Jencks & Riesman, 1968). According to Baldrige, et al. (1973), this increase in influence was due to several factors including "expanding enrollments, a public belief in the ability of education

to solve social problems, generous financial support, the growth of large-scale research . . . and a shortage of personnel” (pp. 532–533). Over the ensuing decades, however, a new set of environmental forces emerged (Austin & Gamson, 1983; Honan & Teferra, 2001; Kerr, 1987, Waugh, Jr., 2003). Consequently, external constituents became less supportive of higher education. Faculty influence began to wane due to growing disillusionment about higher education’s ability to solve social ills; decreases in financial support to public universities, decreases in governmental research funding, and flattening enrollment numbers (Baldrige, et al., 1973, p. 533). Dill and Sporn (as cited in Gumport and Sporn, 1999) add to this list of environmental challenges citing expansion of government regulations, changes in student demographics, the impact of new technologies, and increased competition for students. As Gumport and Sporn (1999) note, higher education institutions are experiencing ever increasing pressure “to solve problems of costs, quality, effectiveness, and access” (p. 3). This is demonstrated in the recent debate about accountability in public higher education that followed release of the U.S. Department of Education’s “Spellings Commission” report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of Higher Education* (2006).

Gumport and Sporn (1999) argue that this environmental shift has resulted in a parallel shift in the roles of university administrators who are being called on to “mediate and even manage the relationships between the organization and its environments” (p. 4), and who are charged with responsibility for creating adaptive change within the institution to meet external demands. According to Gumport and Sporn (1999), administrative responsibility for interfacing with multiple external constituencies has resulted in three new administrative roles: 1) developing processes to maintain information about the multiple environments that impinge on the university, 2) insuring institutional compliance with governmental regulations and accrediting standards, and 3) generating new sources of funding to replace dwindling state support (pp. 29–30). Gumport and Sporn (1999) cite Barrow’s observation

that the long-term, structural nature of the changes taking place in society have caused administrators to move “away from short-term crisis management to strategic planning for prolonged challenges” (p.11). In short, administrators are now responsible for ensuring that the institution can adapt to its external environment in ways that insure institutional survival. Additionally, institutions no longer have the resources to provide additive solutions to make needed changes in the ways they did in the past (Gumport 2000).

Faced with growing pressure from external constituencies, faculty members tend to view the role of administration as one of shielding them from burgeoning external demands. Unfortunately, in today’s environment adapting to external requirements often necessitates internal changes that directly impact programs and practices (Gumport & Sporn, 1999). For example, Oakland University’s regional accrediting agency, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), requires OU to meet a set of criteria for continued accreditation. When the university underwent its decennial accreditation review in 1999, the NCA required a follow-up focused visit on general education and assessment. An NCA focused visit gives the institution five years to make significant changes in the areas cited by the consultant-evaluator team as needing improvement. Through the hard work of faculty and staff, OU renewed general education in ways that maintained disciplinary rigor while making substantive changes to the program. For example, the new program incorporates learning outcomes for all general education areas, capstone experiences, intensive writing in general education, intensive writing in major courses, and other modifications that have allowed OU to improve student education as well as to meet the NCA’s quality improvement criteria.

Nevertheless, the need for internal adjustments brought on by complying with external state or accreditation demands is one source of stress in the faculty’s relationship with administration. Another source of tension can be found in the nature of the work that faculty and administrators perform. Del Favero (2003, p. 904) notes that faculty and administrators

have different foci, reward structures, and allegiances. She argues that the focus of administrative work is problem solving and institutional enhancement. According to Del Favero (2003), administrators receive rewards and advancements for success on initiatives at the institutional level, and their primary allegiance is to the institution.

On the other hand, faculty work is primarily based in their discipline and department (Del Favero, 2003). She notes that the career advancement of faculty is tied to their discipline, as well as to peers outside of the institution. Service to the institution is not counted highly in the promotion and tenure process. In fact, service is often seen as a distraction from the main business of faculty work. Williams, Gore, Broches, and Lostoski (1987) observe:

Faculty members at major research universities today are subjected to such a variety of role expectations that they cannot possibly hope to fulfill all of them. . . . All of this comes to mean that, for most faculty members, service on the administrative and advisory committees, through which the faculty participates in governance, typically receives a secondary priority—or none at all (p. 629).

Del Favero (2003) reports that, according to research, faculty's first allegiance is to their discipline and only secondarily to the institution. Further, she notes that "scholarship does not require faculty to understand the work of administrators" (p. 905), and cites Lucas and Parker who conclude that this lack of understanding "frustrates collaboration and cooperation" between faculty and administration (p. 904).

In addition to disturbances caused by external demands and differences in roles, strongly held beliefs can also dampen faculty relationships with administrators. Research helps to shed light on some of these divisive beliefs. For example, the belief that a "community of scholars" can only be found in "small colleges that have escaped the creeping bureaucratization infecting multiversities" continues even though research indicates this is not the case (Baldrige, et al., 1973, p.

534–535). During the 1960s and 1970s universities grew rapidly and researchers studied the impact of university expansion on faculty roles. The Stanford Project on Academic Governance conducted a study of 249 institutions in the United States to examine the following questions: “Where can an individual professor best protect his specialized academic interests, and retain the freedom to teach, write, and conduct research without interference?” and “under what organizational conditions can disciplinary departments control their own destinies by determining curriculum, hiring and promoting faculty, and selecting students?” (Baldrige, et al., 1973, p. 534). The study looked at peer evaluation, departmental autonomy, freedom from work regulations, decision decentralization, and professional autonomy.

According to Baldrige, et al., the results showed that 1) larger institutions report higher levels of peer evaluation; 2) larger institutions report more departmental control over selection of faculty, course additions, and awarding tenure and promotion; 3) larger institutions show more personal freedom from over-regulation, freedom from individual course regulation, and flexible personal contracts; 4) there was little variation in the amount of decentralized decision-making ability among large, medium, and small institutions; and 5) larger institutions provided more personal autonomy. Baldrige, et al. (1973) explain the differences they found by pointing out that in large institutions there is more fragmentation, thus more autonomy; there is more specialization, so faculty are not dealing with the entire institution; there is greater faculty expertise resulting in more trust in faculty opinions; and, even though the external environment impinges on the institution, there is still greater faculty insulation from external forces in larger institutions.

Looking Deeper

Given what appears to be a deepening divide between faculty and administrators nationally, what factors could help to im-

prove understanding? Maree Conway's (1998) work identifies three prerequisites for effective faculty and administrator collaboration including: administrators valuing the academic heritage and traditions that make the institution distinctive, faculty understanding of the role of administration and its importance and value to the institution, and faculty acknowledgement that administrators can carry out their work in ways that do not, of necessity, need to compromise the academic mission of the institution.

Conway (1998) also discusses another factor that could be added to the list as a fourth prerequisite. She argues that one impediment to effective faculty and administrator collaboration is the perception of homogeneity, i.e., that all faculty (or all administrators) have identical perceptions and beliefs. The fallacy of this viewpoint is demonstrated in the research of Williams, Gore, Broches, and Lostoski (1987) who found that the views of the faculty regarding governance fell into six categories: the collegial minded (who like shared governance), activists (who like collective bargaining), acceptors (who let others decide), hierarchicals (who like strong structure), copers (who are less involved), and the completely disengaged. Less research has been done on the perspectives of administrators. Nevertheless, like faculty, administrators are not a homogeneous group. Conway (1998) points out that the mix of individuals that count as "administration" varies widely. It ranges from academic administrators who undergo the promotion and tenure process to professional administrators hired for particular areas of expertise (e.g., finance, advising, admissions). Conway (1998, p. 3) observes that, "while there is much goodwill between individual administrators and academics, the "them and us" dichotomy appears to be an accepted, albeit unwritten, way of viewing the relationship between the two groups." Thus, a fourth prerequisite for improving faculty and administrator relationships is the ability of individuals to view both faculty and administrators as complex human groups whose members represent a variety of opinions and viewpoints.

A Different Approach

One common approach to problems is to think that there is a single best solution based on one choice, or one side, being superior to the other. For many human problems this either/or thinking works. However, there are dilemmas in which the two sides are so intertwined that an either/or choice is not possible. Barry Johnson (1993, 1996) describes such organizational dilemmas as polarities. Polarities are situations in which the opposing options are so interdependent that a total win for one can mean a loss for both.

Organizational polarities underlie several university tensions. For example, although he did not label it as such, Clark Kerr (1987, p. 183) identified a polarity in universities when he stated that there is a struggle between “accumulated heritage versus modern imperatives.” Universities have earned their legacy through the development of traditional goals and values related to developing, preserving, and disseminating knowledge (Gumport, 2000, p. 87). Gumport (2000) observes that for universities to move too far from their traditional mission could mean a loss of moral legitimacy as institutions. On the other hand, she notes that the university’s external environment is very real, and it is dramatically different from past decades. The complexity of today’s internal university environment has also grown exponentially over the past twenty-five years. For example, Gumport notes that by 1995 the University of Michigan’s annual budget of \$2.5 billion would have put it at a level of 200th on the Fortune 500 list (Duderstadt in Gumport, 2000). Institutions that ignore external pressures and the need for internal management may not survive to carry out their missions no matter how legitimate. Thus, for universities, legitimacy and survival represent a polarity whose poles are intertwined and interdependent.

How, then, does an institution deal effectively with polarities? According to Johnson (1996), people on each side of the polarity have beliefs about the advantages of their position and the disadvantages of what they perceive to be an opposing po-

sition. In addition they have fears about what will happen if the opposer's position "wins." Thus, the *first step* in balancing a polarity (since it cannot be eliminated) is to recognize that one is dealing with an interdependent polarity not a conflict with an easy solution (Johnson, 1996, p. 106).

The *second step* is to acknowledge that both sides have advantages and disadvantages (Johnson, 1996, p. 106). If we return to the polarity of legitimacy and survival, following Johnson, we can identify the advantages and disadvantages of each pole. For example, one of the advantages of the legitimacy pole, which focuses on traditional university mission and heritage, would be a strong foundation of academic values. Faculty members want administrators to understand and respect what they mean by academic values. So, it would be advantageous for the faculty on a campus to have a statement of the values they hold. Not all campuses hold the same academic values. For example, at Eastern Washington University (2005, p. 1) the faculty has developed a statement of their ten core values that includes academic freedom but goes beyond it to embrace:

diversity of students, faculty, and administrators; constructive and collaborative relationships; instruction designed to develop the love of learning, inquiry, and knowledge for its own sake; instruction designed to foster learning skills; instruction designed to encourage applied learning; substantial faculty leadership in university affairs; scholarship and the arts; community service; and ethical conduct

Communicating such ideals to the campus and to constituents can: 1) clarify what is meant by that particular faculty's academic values, 2) provide a starting point for dialogue and 3) allow faculty to become aware of the values that faculty and administrators hold in common. Identifying advantages of a pole can also help proponents to agree on what it means to them. However, it is often the case that proponents of one side in a polarity also have only a vague idea of their pole's disadvan-

tages. For example, one of the disadvantages of adhering too rigidly to the legitimacy pole might be unresponsiveness to the current needs of the institution's constituents. One advantage of the survival perspective might be increased university funds through expanded enrollments while a disadvantage might be lack of instructional space. Honest articulation of the various advantages and disadvantages of both sides of a polarity can add clarity and lead to better understanding and decision-making.

After articulating the advantages and disadvantages of one's own pole, the *third step* in balancing a polarity is to clarify specific fears about what will happen if the institution falls into the disadvantages of the other pole with sensitivity to these "downsides as they are experienced" (Johnson, 1996, p. 106). The *fourth step* in addressing a polarity is to engage in dialogue about the two poles. According to Johnson (1996), it is the norm for proponents to focus on the disadvantages of the other pole (which they think is the problem) and the advantages of their pole (which they think is the solution). Instead, there needs to be focus on how to actualize the advantages of both poles to the greatest extent possible while minimizing the disadvantages (McNaught, 2003).

Articulating disadvantages and fears about both poles allows negative factors to be used as a guide for recognizing when the process gets too far off course. *Nevertheless, focus should remain on how to achieve the advantages of both poles rather than dwelling on the disadvantages of either. Only with recognition that the two poles are interdependent and that both have advantages and disadvantages is this possible.* By understanding a polarity, both parties come to recognize that the process involves shifts in momentum from one pole to another but that momentum also returns to the original pole in an ongoing cycle (Johnson, 1996, p.106). By allowing these shifts, the polarity is kept in balance.

Conversations about existing polarities do not always occur on campuses, or they occur at the bargaining table where there is insufficient time for a discussion of this scope

and where tensions can run high. To be most productive campuses need to engage in discussions of polarities at less stressful times. The hope is that by engaging in such dialogue both parties will reach understanding of and respect for the other's viewpoint along with a recognition of their *interdependence*. By understanding the interdependent nature of a polarity, both parties can examine the changes taking place on campus in view of common needs and desires while attempting to avoid the institutional losses that occur when polarities get out of balance.

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