

Assessing and Addressing Faculty Morale: Cultivating Consciousness, Empathy, and Empowerment

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Academic freedom and First Amendment rights are perennial topics of discussion on college campuses (Bollag, 2004; Fish, 2004; Hollingsworth, 2000; Howard, 2004), yet it is clear from even casual conversation that individual faculty members often feel constrained when discussing their own professional experiences with colleagues. Junior faculty may worry that honestly voicing difficult experiences or negative impressions will be interpreted as unprofessional or that their comments will offend senior colleagues who are positioned to influence their future success (Bullough, 2000; Gubitosi, 1996; Guilfoyle, 1995; Newman, 1999). Even established,

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tenured faculty may be reluctant to make waves or risk alienating powerful colleagues. In recent years, as the number of tenure-track faculty appointments has declined nationally and new hires are held to increasingly higher standards of productivity (Finkelstein, 2003; Graubard, 2001), the sense of vulnerability on the part of faculty has only intensified. As Howard Bowen and Jack Schuster (1986) observe:

Over the years since 1970, faculty members in most institutions have had a sense of increasing anxiety about the continuity of their appointments. Today, this anxiety ranges from slight in the case of well-established professors with tenured positions in strong institutions, to acute for non-tenured persons in unstable institutions. . . . We have heard from several sources that faculty members who are fearful for their jobs—particularly younger faculty members hopeful of tenure—feel constrained in their utterances and in their writings. (p. 126)

In this increasingly cautious—even fearful—environment, how can faculty members at a given institution engage in meaningful discussion about issues that affect their professional lives? Likewise, how can they learn about and understand the range of experiences their colleagues encounter? Finally, how can faculty become involved in generating solutions for problematic environments, behaviors, practices, or policies when—for understandable reasons—they are reluctant to publicly acknowledge many of their own pivotal professional experiences?

We suggest a strategy employed by one Research I university to address these questions. The approach was an outgrowth of a two-year research project on faculty satisfaction and retention. We used the narrative data generated by this larger study to craft a set of fictional scenarios that portrayed issues affecting a wide range of faculty at the institution. Facilitators then used these scenarios as the basis for discussions with groups of faculty at the same university. Because each scenario drew on the experiences of multiple people, these discussions allowed faculty to explore institutionally relevant experiences without exposing the identifiable stories of particular individuals. Capitalizing on the evocative power of narratives, these discussions have allowed faculty to engage in fruitful—even transformative—dialogue about issues that impact them.

In this paper, we (a) outline the methods and results of the original research project, (b) explain the purpose of scenario-based discussions and the process used to create the scenarios, (c) describe the outcomes of discussions with various faculty groups, and (d) discuss how this method can be adapted to other institutions and used to inform faculty development efforts. First, however, we situate our approach theoretically within the emerging literature on narrative.

NARRATIVE THEORY: THE POWER OF STORIES

Much of the literature on faculty satisfaction relies heavily on quantitative data, enumerating and weighting the various factors affecting faculty morale and retention (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998; Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Boyer, Altbach, & Whitelaw, 1995; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; Manger & Eikeland, 1990; Matier, 1990; Olsen, Maple, & Stage, 1995; Smart, 1990). Although such data reveal general patterns and facilitate comparisons among institutions, they are considerably less useful for illuminating the complex experiences of faculty in specific contexts. As D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (2000) point out, in quantifying experience we strip it of its richness and expression; narrative, they argue, retains much of this richness. Because our intention in this research was to better understand the experiences of faculty at this university, we drew on narrative theory to inform both our approach to data collection and our use of these data as part of the institutional response.

Narrative theory has attracted scholars in a range of disciplines that assist people in analyzing and interpreting choices and decisions made within particular contexts. The emerging field of narrative medicine, for example, uses the stories that patients and doctors tell about illness and treatment to help patients find meaning and coherence in their experience of suffering and to help doctors become more reflective, conscious, and empathetic (Brody, 1987; Hunter, 1991; Kleinman, 1988). In bioethics, narratives (often fictional) are used to explore the moral dimensions of health care (Charon & Montello, 2002; Frank, 1995), and in psychology, researchers employ a narrative approach to understanding significant turning points in the lives of individuals (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). It is our belief that the narrative approach provides an equally valuable tool for understanding faculty experiences, articulating alternatives, and building stronger university communities.

Narrative approaches begin with the premise that we understand the world through the stories we tell and the stories we hear (Charon & Montello, 2002; McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich, 2001). Personal narratives situate thought and behavior within the complexly interwoven fabric of real lives, establishing a context in which actions and perceptions can be interpreted and understood. Reflecting on these narratives helps to foster greater consciousness, increased empathy, and more creative approaches to problem solving.

The project we describe has several layers of narrative. First, the participants in our study told their own stories in confidential interviews. In doing so, they fit the events and experiences of their professional lives into a coherent narrative structure, creating meaning in the telling of their stories. As Dan McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (2001) note:

Meaning is generated by the linkages the participant makes between aspects of the life he or she is living and his or her understanding of these aspects. The role of the researcher is then to connect this understanding with some form of conceptual interpretation, which is meaning constructed at another level of analysis. (p. xii)

We used the interview data to generate composite narratives that constituted a second kind of narrative, fictional yet firmly rooted in real experience. Finally, we asked groups of faculty to read these scenarios and discuss them with trained facilitators. Out of these scenario-based discussions came a third set of narratives: the responses of real faculty to their colleagues' collective experiences. The specific methodology is explained below.

We believe that these scenario-based discussions accomplish an important goal, not only by raising awareness of issues affecting faculty on campus, but also by fostering greater empathy on the part of senior faculty and a sense of empowerment among junior faculty. As a number of researchers in higher education have observed, senior faculty often entered their field and their institution under very different circumstances than those of their younger colleagues (Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Finkelstein, 1984; Graubard, 2001). These differences include changes in the student body, new financial realities, rapidly changing educational technologies, and greater numbers of part-time faculty. Thus, while scenario-based discussions foster empathy among all faculty members, they are particularly useful in helping senior faculty understand the experiences of junior colleagues.

By the same token, scenario-based discussions encourage a proactive attitude on the part of junior faculty by allowing them to collectively brainstorm effective ways to respond to various situations they may encounter. For example, discussing a scenario in which the protagonist is suddenly denied tenure may prompt junior faculty to consider what sorts of feedback they need from their department heads and senior colleagues to avoid the same fate. It might even mobilize a group of junior faculty to push for more clearly established promotion criteria.

THE LARGER STUDY

The larger study in which this particular project was situated was conducted at a small Research I university over a period of two years (2002–2003). It was designed to provide a richer understanding of the ways in which events shape faculty satisfaction and dissatisfaction and, in turn, influence individual decisions to remain at or to leave the university (Ambrose, Huston, & Norman, in press). To accomplish these goals, we needed both institution-specific and detailed, narrative data.

Institution-specific data were important to obtain because academic institutions differ in important ways, with consequences for faculty experiences and morale (Bluedorn, 1982; Clark, Corcoran, & Lewis, 1986; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002). The university targeted in this research has a very distinctive institutional culture, emphasizing interdisciplinary collaboration, entrepreneurship, and innovation. It also has a specific set of financial constraints and opportunities—a relatively low endowment but an excellent track record at attracting research grants. Additionally, the university's exceptionally decentralized administrative structure concentrates power in the hands of individual department heads. Finally, the university is in a medium-sized city with a low cost of living but also a somewhat stagnant job market which has implications for faculty spouses/partners. These factors, among others, were significant in shaping faculty experiences and merited close examination. A high level of specificity was also critical for creating scenarios that were faithful to the circumstances at this particular institution.

Detailed, narrative data were also essential for revealing the complex chronology of events and interaction of experiences that shaped faculty perceptions (Chilcote, 1987; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Focusing on faculty narratives allowed us to draw on the principal strengths of qualitative research, as identified by Joseph Maxwell (1996): its capacity to examine (a) the *meaning* for participants (in this case, faculty members) of the events, situations, and actions in which they are involved, (b) the particular *context* within which participants act and the influence this context has on their actions, (c) *unanticipated* phenomena and influences, which emerge spontaneously in open-ended interviews as they cannot in structured surveys, (d) the *process* by which events and actions take place, and (5) complex *causal* relationships, in this case the varying and interacting causes of faculty satisfaction (pp. 17–20).

In this study, we conducted 123 telephone interviews with 61 former faculty members and a cohort of 62 current faculty members, matched by department and year of appointment. The interviewees were an anthropologist and a social historian, neither of whom had extensive prior contact with the institution and who thus did not bring biases about the institutional culture. The semi-structured interviews employed several open-ended questions in which respondents were asked to describe their experience at the institution and any significant factors or critical incidents that had impacted their experience. They were encouraged to tell their stories in their own way, thereby illuminating the experiences and issues that were most relevant to them.

Two other researchers (not the interviewees) independently coded the completed interviews to identify common issues. Unlike coding in quantitative research, the goal of our coding was “not to produce counts of

things, but to fracture the data and rearrange it [sic] into categories that facilitate the comparison of data within and between categories and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 78). In other words, the coding system was solidly grounded in the data and did not reflect preexisting categories or expectations.

The narrative data provided information on a variety of issues. The coded data revealed university-wide patterns: broad issues that spanned departments and years and related to features of institutional organization and culture. The narratives themselves clarified the particularities of the issues raised; for example, we could see exactly what various faculty members perceived as fair or unfair behavior on the part of department heads, how they defined "lack of collegiality," what sorts of mentoring had proven useful in specific circumstances, etc. Faculty stories also revealed the interaction of events in a faculty member's personal and professional life and how faculty interpreted these events. This level of detail proved invaluable in guiding the production of fictional scenarios that were complex, nuanced, and sufficiently "real" to prompt meaningful discussion.

We discuss the results of our larger study at length in another article (Ambrose, Huston & Norman, in press), but to illuminate the issues presented in the scenario discussions, we briefly summarize the four central satisfaction issues that emerged in this study: collegiality, leadership, mentoring and reappointment, and promotion and tenure.

The issue most frequently mentioned by faculty in relation to job dissatisfaction—an issue raised in the literature on faculty satisfaction at large—was *lack of collegiality* (Barnes, Agago, & Coombs, 1998; Manger & Ekeland, 1990; Olsen & Sorcinelli, 1992; Smart, 1990; Turner & Boice, 1987; Walvoord et al., 2000). They also identified many features of departmental life that they felt negatively impacted collegiality, some of which are:

- Incivility within departments: i.e., "factionalism," "Balkanization," "backstabbing," etc., sometimes involving struggles over limited resources (e.g., funding, graduate students, lab space) and conflicts between faculty in traditional and emerging fields.
- Lack of intellectual community: i.e., little exchange of ideas among colleagues, and a lack of interest in one another's work or in collaboration.
- Preoccupied or disinterested senior faculty: i.e., senior faculty who are too busy to provide advice, feedback or recognition to junior colleagues, or are simply not interested in their work.

Although we had expected that departmental politics would negatively affect faculty satisfaction, one finding we did not entirely anticipate was the subtler erosion of faculty morale that occurred when senior colleagues lacked

the time, energy, or will to notice and discuss their colleagues' work, to collaborate on projects, or simply to socialize. The effect on junior faculty of senior faculty disengagement is a complex issue in itself and will be addressed at length in a forthcoming paper (Huston, Norman, & Ambrose, 2005).

A second issue that significantly contributed to faculty dissatisfaction was *ineffective leadership*, in this case from department heads. As mentioned previously, a peculiarity of this particular university is its highly decentralized administrative structure, which concentrates decision-making power in the hands of department heads. The considerable influence of department heads was obvious in faculty narratives, which were often organized chronologically by department head (for example, "I was happy under the previous head for the following reasons, but when the current head came in, everything changed"). The centrality of department heads in almost every narrative pointed to the significant weight that faculty assigned to such leaders in creating a particular environment—whether positive or negative. This finding echoes that of other researchers who have noted that the role of the department head or chair is vital to the success and satisfaction of junior faculty (Creswell et al., 1990; Tucker, 1984; Wheeler, 1992). Faculty who complained about ineffective leadership often pointed to the department head's

- Inability to manage conflict: e.g., failure to control factionalism, to unify the department, or to settle disputes effectively.
- A tendency to play favorites: e.g., a pattern of distributing assignments and departmental resources inequitably, etc.
- Failure to communicate effectively: e.g., failure to provide junior faculty with meaningful and timely feedback and to communicate expectations clearly.

In fact, the need for department heads or chairs to balance multiple roles successfully is so universally pressing that a recent issue of *New Directions in Higher Education* was dedicated to articulating these roles and their relevant stakeholders (Gmelch & Schuh, 2004).

The third issue to emerge was a perceived *lack of appropriate and meaningful mentoring*, an issue receiving a lot of press in the last decade (Boice, 1992; Boyle & Boice, 1998; Philip & Hendry, 2000). It became clear from interviews with faculty who had received effective mentoring, as well as with faculty who had not, that junior faculty benefited tremendously from having strong mentoring relationships. Our research indicated that a significant source of faculty dissatisfaction was the sense that necessary help and advice were not available at key points in the professional trajectory. Faculty noted, moreover, that a diverse range of mentoring was necessary: Faculty needed advice not only in intellectual and professional matters, but

also help in navigating departmental politics and balancing the demands of work and family. They identified these areas where mentoring had been or would have been helpful:

- Guidance on different aspects of work: e.g., feedback on proposals, papers, and courses.
- Help in setting priorities: e.g., advice on where to put time and energy (committee work, outreach, establishing professional connections, teaching, etc.) and help in determining when to say no.
- Help in navigating departmental politics: e.g., assistance in identifying and negotiating sensitive political issues within the department and advice on how to deal with factionalism.

Finally, faculty interviews revealed the perception of a *flawed reappointment, promotion, and tenure (RPT) process*, an experience that is anxiety-producing for junior faculty in general (Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Finkelstein & LaCelle-Peterson, 1992; Li, 1998; Sibley-Fries, 1986). Interestingly, RPT was identified as problematic not only by former faculty (which one might expect) but by an even greater number of current *tenured* faculty. In fact, a full 50% of current tenured faculty interviewed lacked faith in the integrity of the RPT process, compared to only 28% of former faculty. Faculty described the following sorts of flaws with the RPT process:

- Lack of feedback on progress: e.g., candidates are not told about shortcomings in their work until it is too late; in some cases, the candidate gets no indication that anything is wrong until a negative promotion decision has been reached, whereupon she or he feels blindsided.
- Poorly defined or inconsistently applied promotion criteria: e.g., it is unclear which aspect of a candidate's work (research, teaching, service) will "count" in promotion decisions, or criteria are applied so inconsistently that decisions appear based on politics, not merit.
- Overly "opaque" RPT processes: e.g., candidates cannot defend themselves from misinformation and lack of due process because RPT decisions are made in secret; furthermore, because RPT decisions are not discussed openly, the outcomes can seem capricious and political.

Faculty interviews also revealed many positive experiences of collegiality, leadership, mentoring, and RPT. These positive accounts helped to clarify features of university life that enhance faculty satisfaction: what collegial departments do for their members, what effective leadership entails, what positive mentoring involves, and what happens when the RPT process works as it should. Understanding satisfaction along with dissatisfaction was not only necessary for assessing the experiences of faculty, but also for designing scenarios that reflected the complexity of faculty lives which, after all,

typically involve experiences with both effective *and* ineffective leadership, both positive *and* negative perceptions of the RPT process, etc.

Collegiality, leadership, mentoring, and RPT are, of course, important issues to faculty in all institutions; they are not institution specific. However, a number of institutional features have a direct bearing on how issues like collegiality, leadership, mentoring, and RPT are experienced and perceived. Among them are the values of the institution, its size and location, its administrative structure, financial situation, tenure system, reputation, etc. (Bluedorn, 1982; Clark, Corcoran, & Lewis, 1986; Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; Wimsatt, 2003). While it is unnecessary to detail them all here, particular institutional features create a unique set of circumstances affecting faculty satisfaction, as suggested in the following example.

As mentioned previously, the university in question places a high premium on interdisciplinary collaboration. Although many of the faculty members we interviewed found this emphasis on interdisciplinarity exciting, many also cited problems. One relatively common complaint was that, while the university encouraged interdisciplinary work, specific departments often lacked reliable mechanisms for evaluating its merit. A faculty member who published outside his discipline's traditional journals, for example, might find his scholarship questioned at promotion time simply because his senior colleagues continued to use traditional, discipline-based performance criteria. Such evaluations, in turn, fed the larger perception (discussed previously) that the RPT process was unfair and arbitrary.

Another effect of the university's interdisciplinary emphasis was that, in some newer, explicitly interdisciplinary departments, a faculty member was sometimes the sole representative of her particular discipline or subdiscipline, without colleagues who knew or understood her work. This situation often contributed to a feeling of intellectual isolation, which consequently exacerbated some faculty's feeling of little departmental collegiality.

The example above—of this university's interdisciplinary emphasis and its impact on faculty—points to the fact that the experiences of university faculty are not generic. Rather, they are shaped by specific conditions at their particular institutions. Understanding how these specific features colored the experience of the faculty in our study proved critical for creating scenarios that faithfully captured the texture, depth, and complexity of faculty stories and portrayed the university culture in authentic terms.

CREATING THE SCENARIOS

Ultimately, our goal in gathering the data described briefly above was to spark constructive dialogue on campus about issues that were impacting faculty morale and retention. We wanted to draw on the real-life experiences revealed in interviews with individual faculty without exposing any

