Who Needs Development?

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DURING a bout of insomnia, Sarah B.—chair of French and Italian at a state university—decided that someone had to do something. The old department was not the same. It seemed more and more split between greenhorns and mossbacks. The greenhorns knew their specialties, but some of them were struggling in the literature survey and basic language classes. The students hadn’t lodged any formal complaints but were giving three new professors miserable ratings on their evaluations. The two youngest assistant profs, who had looked invincible when hired, had begun protesting that teaching, counseling, and committee meetings left them no time to write.

The senior faculty members had an average of ten years—a third of their careers—left before retirement. Only one had actually dropped out (to sell Amway), but several seemed tired of teaching, reluctant to do any publishable research, and more drawn to community causes. Few of the senior people had been to Europe in the last fifteen years, and their language skills were increasingly rusty. Dudley R. kept griping about not relating to the “strange” students he was getting—kids with purple hair, middle-aged former homemakers, armed-service retirees, racial minorities. Sarah’s two best scholars had just been tapped for the undergraduate studies office and the study-abroad program. Calvin W. and Amelia N., who had always taught the big culture and literature survey classes, were retiring in the next year. Jerry D., denied promotion to full professor last year, looked and acted frightfully depressed. The department had good people, but they needed more collegiality, more discussion of teaching and research ideas, more interaction with students, more life.

There were external problems, too. The papers were full of exposés and complaints from parents about rising tuition and attrition rates and the bookstore was prominently displaying yet another attack on the professorial “racket.” Most important, the vice president and the dean had been talking about budget cuts and evaluations to decide who should get the axe. The vice president was determined to start a molecular biology program, and needed big bucks to do it. He was ready to cut whole programs—the big library science graduate program was already gone and the scuttlebutt had it that the taste of blood had only whetted his appetite. Maybe something needed to be done, something with a name like faculty effectiveness improvement or renewal or curriculum review or colloquia or strategic planning.

Sarah remembered talking last week to her neighbor, who worked at a fast-growing local software firm. He said his company spent lots of time and money on training and development and couldn’t possibly stay competitive otherwise. He couldn’t understand why any rational institution wouldn’t want to protect its million-dollar-plus investment in each employee’s salary over the course of a career with a well-crafted development program. He thought it unrealistic to believe people could keep up with their fields, support departmental goals, and cope with job burnout completely on their own. Sarah had bravely argued that academics were a different breed, the last of the true-grit, self-sufficient individualists, but she had nagging doubts.

Setting the Stage: Lenin versus Jean Valjean

We leave Sarah to look for a few modest, achievable steps to take. A call to a college or university faculty development office or committee (see also Danforth Center, Instructional Development, Center for Effective Teaching, Teaching and Learning Center, Teaching Support Office, Center for Curriculum Development, Evaluation and Research, Assessment Services, and so on) might yield the following basic suggestions on development.

Make development your main job. To be effective, an organization must have an ongoing, self-renewing program of human-resource development (Tucker 263). Drawing up budgets, issuing reports, and managing teaching assignments are important tasks, but a department is its faculty members, and its success depends on their quality.

Remember that development concerns more than teaching. On most campuses, development has been taken to mean only “improvement of teaching,” but a good development program relates to everything the department does—teaching, scholarship, and service—and is broadly conceived to meet the shared goals of the institution, department members, and students. Some experts believe that Total Quality Management—a systematic approach to our constituents, practices, and skills—provides a good
It is not enough to hold the bar high and tell professors and leaders is to build their charges' faith in themselves. This expression of interest in faculty members' opinions is in itself motivating. If people suggest goals and policies that seem unworkable, do not reject their ideas immediately. Instead, establish a problem-solving framework: listen carefully and openly; you may want to suggest that they talk to other faculty members about their proposals and how to cope with the problems you see (McKeachie 2). The very act of including colleagues in the problem-solving process is far more important for long-range development than any given solution is.

Emphasize planning. When interviewing faculty members, emphasize plans for the future at least as much as past behavior, especially in problem cases. If you hold annual reviews, ask each faculty member to prepare by writing a plan for the future based on the questions in the above paragraph, in addition to a full report on the past year's activities (Jarvis 21). Set a good example by making departmental planning an important part of your agenda and include department members in the planning and goal-setting process. Build confidence. The main responsibility of teachers and leaders is to build their charges' faith in themselves. It is not enough to hold the bar high and tell professors to jump: even if they want to achieve a goal, they will walk away unless they believe that they can do it. Help faculty members set goals—like writing one hour a day or getting usable feedback from students—that you and they believe they can achieve. Inquire about and praise participation in the process toward goals, not just the achievement of the goals themselves. Seize every opportunity to praise efforts and small successes and encourage other department members to do the same. Remember that student and peer evaluations of teaching can be devastating and must be handled skillfully (McKeachie 3); someone in the department should help colleagues understand that every teacher receives some negative comments and that they should consider the overall trends. Emphasize faculty members' areas of competence, help them select appropriate remedies for problems, and encourage them to play to their strengths.

Examine your formal reward system. Local reward criteria should be congruent with the goals of your development program; rewarding activity A (e.g., publishing) while hoping for activity B (e.g., teaching) doesn't work any better in academia than it does in industry. See what leeway you have to adjust the criteria for tenure, advancement, and merit pay to reflect the long-term goals of your department. Sometimes, this adjustment may mean greater emphasis on teaching and service or more flexibility in rewarding faculty members for unusual strength in one area rather than all three. It may also require broadening the criteria to reward good work in the scholarship of teaching: for example, research and publication in methods of teaching literature, linguistics, or language. Reward collegiality and cooperation. Every chair has to work within college and university guidelines, but just letting your colleagues know you are on their side will help.

Do what you can to make sure that the process, as well as the criteria, works for your people. Too many good people are torpedoed by uncaring and inattentive committees even after the criteria are rewritten. Try to arrange for those who share your vision to serve on the promotion and tenure committees at the departmental institutional levels; then work to see that they are instructed on, and act to support, your department's goals.

Use all your incentives. Even if your institution's reward criteria are not congruent with your developmental goals and you have very little discretionary money available, the usual chair's complaint that there are no "carrots" to offer is nonsense. Every chair can provide "transformational leadership" by recognizing contributions, using positive reinforcement, and celebrating accomplishments. Faculty members often say, "You get very little thanks around here for anything you do. People want things done yesterday, but nobody seems to appreciate the extra effort you make for them." . . . Because chairpersons have regular contact with their faculty on a day-to-day basis they are in the best position to provide that appreciation and acknowledgment. (Lucas 8)
Faculty members do care about monetary rewards, but they care even more about peer appreciation, public recognition, and the simple acknowledgment that they are making an important contribution to the welfare of the department and its students.

Annual awards banquets, faculty meetings, bulletin boards, and chance meetings in the hallway all present opportunities for recognition. Brown-bag colloquia or other department gatherings can be good opportunities to invite department members to discuss—even very informally—subjects of interest to them that also touch on department goals. These topics may include traditional scholarly questions, but should not be limited to them; teaching and administrative issues are also important to the good of the department and worthy of serious thought and effort.

Many professors—especially newer ones—get more excited over a small, unexpected gesture of support for a project than they do about their annual raises. One young ABD professor at a liberal arts college was deeply touched by, and remains permanently grateful for, a modest grant to help him complete his dissertation. Another young faculty member at a sprawling western university received an unexpected fifty dollars from a chair to mail a questionnaire that provided material for his first paper at a national convention. That fifty dollars meant more to him than the travel support, promotions, and federal grants he has received since.

College and university awards and newspaper articles about faculty members can be inspiring. Department members will usually find time to nominate colleagues or write press releases if asked to do so, especially if they know their help is important to you and is part of creating a climate of support and collegiality. Those who spend most of their efforts on teaching often feel especially unappreciated. If they are important to the department, make sure that they are nominated (and renominated if necessary) for teaching awards.

Promote collegiality. The most important factor in faculty development is collegiality, “the pursuit of truth in the company of friends” (Jarvis 40). Despite many humanists’ tendency to isolate themselves, great scholarship and great teaching are usually products of “evocative environments” in a community of scholars (Zuckerman 172). Unfortunately, such collegiality is rare. New faculty members as a rule feel “neglected, isolated, overworked, and deprived of vital support and feedback” (Boice 44). By contrast, the small fraction of new faculty members that Robert Boice labels as “quick starters” manage within the first year to establish regular relationships with colleagues who share their interests (45). A little work on collegiality can help many more to become quick starters.

Effective steps toward building community include involving faculty members in planning, sponsoring mentoring programs, holding group seminars, supporting travel, and inviting speakers to campus. Perhaps the most important step would be a clear signal from you that collegiality is part of everyone’s job description. This mandate does not mean that everyone should spend the day patting each other on the back, but it does mean that they should inquire about each other’s projects, ask and give advice on rough drafts and teaching problems, observe each other’s classes, and show up for a reasonable number of departmental gatherings.

Get help. The above advice, although important, provides only an introduction to faculty development. Your local development office or committee should be able to suggest other specific steps and programs. Another good source is chapters 17 and 18 of Allan Tucker’s Chairing the Academic Department. For suggestions on working with junior faculty members, for whom development programs are most cost-effective, consult the works by Boice, Donald Jarvis, and Mary Sorcinelli and Ann Austin.

Faculty development is less a separate program of activities than it is an overall professional approach—a continuous commitment to individual improvement for the common good. While our training as humanists may not particularly encourage cooperative faculty development efforts, we have compelling extrinsic and intrinsic reasons to engage in the process for the benefit of our departments, our colleagues, and ourselves.

Works Cited


