

From the Dean's Perspective

Richard R. Ranta
University of Memphis

When I first entered administration, the role of a Communication Department (not called that then) was fairly simple. Routine duties included dealing with occasional student, faculty or staff issues; occasional campus politics over teaching territory; staffing the “basic course;” allocating raises (which in a state university system often included at least base across the board raises); occasional promotion and tenure recommendation issues usually related to if there was an adequate number of publications in the few journals that existed or creative works for those units with radio, television and/film areas; and allocation of departmental resources such as travel. Additionally, the administrator tried to make sure that classes had at least a minimum number of students to “make,” that the traditional curriculum did not get too overblown with favorite courses of various faculty members, that the department got a reasonable share of new equipment, positions (including assistantships and part-time), and operational funds from higher administration, that faculty had reasonable course and student FTE loads, and that the number of majors was above the state required minimums to avoid being on an almost never enforced low producing program list. If the administrator was operating in a Journalism Department, you could add supporting adequately a resource list to meet accreditation guidelines and, if you were over the campus newspaper or similar unit, trying to keep it out of trouble with the administration. Although the list above does include some “measures” and informal goals, most of the effort to gain resources was rhetorical. If some fundraising did take place, for a special occasion such as hosting a conference or a special speaker, outside fundraising, especially for a department or unit of a department, was not expected.

Times Have Changed

Although most of the above tasks still remain, the nature of the solution has changed dramatically, and other responsibilities have been added. Additionally, the unit head is submerged in data, data demands, and policies, procedures and time-consuming processes.

Students

Let us begin with *student issues*. Although the instructor of a course has, according to a new Tennessee Board of Regents policy, “responsibility for maintaining control over classroom behavior” and “academic dishonesty” is “prohibited,” elaborate processes involving appeals beyond the communication unit or even the college have come into being with deadlines by which certain written actions must be accomplished. Thanks in large part to the Internet, iPhones, text messaging, and other social media tools, inappropriate classroom behavior, plagiarism, and various “e”-aided cheating attempts appear to be universal. These problems have spawned sophisticated software, monitoring, and “e”-jamming or banning responses. At the middle of all of this is the unit head, dealing with complaints and appeals of faculty decisions to remove or fail the student, monitoring so that notice letters and legal forms are completed on time, providing resources to combat situations in the “e”-classroom environment, and being involved in time consuming meetings and appeals on top of a lot more committee meetings.

Faculty and staff

Faculty and staff matters can also result in lengthy evaluation and retraining processes, observations, accumulation of data, meetings, hearings, and appeals. Even normal evaluations, to say nothing of tenure and promotion, have become much more complex, involving student surveys, formal classroom observations by the chair or an appropriate designee, and procedures supervised

by the Human Resources Department that are “paper,” time, and process intensive. The result is that the unit head is expected to be part higher education legal expert, part watch dog, and part counselor for frustrated or feeling threatened faculty and staff.

Resources

Resources are now “tied” to several years’ plans with identified goals, strategies, “strategic measures” or “metrics,” and identified resources to carry them out. Those resources are often not coming from an internal higher university source, but are expected to be found from grants, fundraising, or reallocation of already existing resources, assuming they have not been cut. Yes, the assumption that internal budgets grow and that raises are normal is a thing of the past for most units. For many, state funding has withered so much that the joke now is that state universities are now not even state assisted, but are rather state abused. State institutions and the Communication Departments are acting very much like private institutions seeking resources from gifts, grants, and enrollment and tuition and fee increases, including online course and special academic activities fees. In many ways, the unit head operates in financial matters more like a small- or moderate-sized private business, except this business is also expected to win friends who will give it money for annual costs or long term endowments as well.

Focus and assessment

Then there is the matter of “focus” and “assessment.” The unit head is supposed to “focus” the department on certain priorities to the exclusion or elimination of others. If it does not increase the amount of money coming into the University through enrollments, then recruiting must be significantly increased or program changes, including position cuts, initiated. One such response has been the rush by many units to health communication or online courses because they bring in added students, thus increasing tuition and fee dollars, or grant opportunities with indirect cost recovery, or both. Of course, one must measure how one is doing by counting *everything*. A popular measure now is the number of graduates as several states have changed their funding formula (which was rarely followed anyway). The universities have been placed in competition within the limited state allocation for higher education to see who can produce the greatest number of graduates the fastest. *Assessment of learning* is provided by periodic state program reviews or reaccreditation reviews. So the unit head has to provide “evidence” of changes in response to efforts, such as surveys, to discover if the students are learning in various programs or even courses. Of course, there is assessment to see if metric benchmarks for the goals have been periodically attained.

Summary

I believe that you can see that the Communication Department, College, or unit head’s role has changed dramatically and consequently, so have the expectations. Now the head is expected to be a higher education legal expert, fundraiser, grant writing encourager or getter, salesman, counselor, mentor, advocate, assessment expert, data keeper and interpreter, watch dog, innovator, and, I almost forgot, teacher, public and professional service member and at least a sometimes researcher or creator.