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Let's Get Political: Strategies For Departmental Survival And Growth

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INTRODUCTION

AT the 1994 SCA Convention in New Orleans, the Association for Communication Administration sponsored a preconvention seminar entitled "Strengthening the Unit: Strategies for Survival and Growth." The seminar featured presentations by two groups of administrators. The first group represented institutions at which speech communication departments are robust and respected. The second group of speakers represented institutions at which speech communication departments or faculty were threatened with program reductions or extinction. Both groups shared valuable insights and lessons with seminar participants. This paper identifies some of the principles for survival and growth presented by one of the seminar speakers. Although understanding the context and climate in which a particular department operates is critical, there are general principles that can strengthen an academic unit regardless of its size or institutional environment.

BACKGROUND

In September 1994, I sent a memorandum to my colleagues in the department of Speech Communication and Theatre at Prince George's Community College (PGCC) regarding "Research for the ACA Seminar on Strengthening the Unit: Strategies for Survival and Growth." My memorandum explained that I was charged with describing how the Prince George's Community College Speech Communication and Theatre Department has survived and continues to prosper amidst tough economic and political times. In short, what have we done to ensure that our speech requirement *remains* a requirement and that our department *continues* to be one of the strongest academic units on campus?

The ACA seminar on "Strengthening the Unit" raised the above question given recent threats to abolish or cut well-established and prestigious communication departments. Roy Berko (1994), the SCA's Associate Director, documented the magnitude of such threats when he wrote:

In the past year over 80 universities, colleges, and community colleges have contacted the SCA national office with pleas for help or requests for advice. They have called for materials to prove the value of a speech communication offering, printed matter proving that speaking and listening are needed skills, and techniques for defending their programs. They have pleaded for assessment techniques and instruments. They have asked for letters to be sent to deans and provosts stating that speech communication is a viable discipline. (p. 1)

The ACA seminar provided an opportunity for representatives from threatened departments to tell their stories and share their hard-learned lessons. The harrowing tales from these institutions suggested that a department's historical legacy and self-perceived importance were no protection against hard-pressed administrations charged with reengineering academic units or entire schools. The revelations of speakers from threatened programs in Nebraska, Ohio, California, and Michigan demonstrated that departments unable to "get political" may fail to survive.

Believing that departments are safest when they have strong, professionally active, and politically savvy leaders who instill in or hire faculty members with similar inclinations and talents, I asked my PGCC colleagues to help me build my case. All full-time faculty members in the department were asked to complete a form indicating the professional activities in which they have participated that have helped the department increase its visibility, credibility, and political clout on- and off-campus. In order to make this task manageable, I asked them to confine their list, with the exception of their current teaching schedules, to those activities that took place during the most recent academic year (1993-1994). I also asked my colleagues to highlight one or two outstanding achievements from previous years such as the chairperson's presidency of ECA, the publication of textbooks, or the creation of the college's Communicating Across the Curriculum Program.

Finally, my memorandum boldly predicted that "we will be astonished and exhausted by the time I finish compiling the list of activities that represent the speech department's professional development and college service activities." My prediction was correct. The department of Speech Communication and Theatre is one of the strongest on campus because the department has exemplified outstanding teaching and scholarship while venturing beyond the classroom and department walls to ensure its growth and survival.

INSTITUTIONAL AND DEPARTMENTAL PROFILE

Prince George's Community College is located in Prince George's County, a large and growing suburban jurisdiction in Maryland that lies on the eastern border of Washington, D.C. The majority of residents are African American and most residents over 18 years old have attended college. The SAT average of high school students is below national and state averages.

The county is considered affluent. The median household effective buying income is higher than in Maryland and the United States as a whole, but it is lower than in a number of neighboring counties. The crime rate is higher than in most neighboring suburban jurisdictions.

Over 35,000 students attend Prince George's Community College annually; half take credit courses and half take noncredit courses. Among credit students in fall 1994:

- The average age was 29.
- 63 percent were women.
- 60 percent were African American.
- 30 percent were white.
- 10 percent were Asian, Hispanic, or American Indian.
- 75 percent were part-time students.
- Half plan to transfer to four-year colleges.

The department of Speech Communication and Theatre at Prince George's Community College includes eleven full-time faculty members with a twelfth faculty member serving, full-time, as academic assistant to the vice president for Instruction. Each semester, approximately 20 part-time faculty are employed to teach approximately 40 percent of all speech communication courses offered. Full-time faculty members are required to teach 15 credit hours each semester unless they have an equivalent released time assignment.

A basic speech communication course is part of the general education curriculum and is required of all students seeking an associate's degree. The required course may differ to meet the needs of a specific curriculum. Among the most common courses meeting the speech communication requirement are:

- SPH 101: Introduction to Speech Communication
- SPH 105: Group Discussion
- SPH 109: Interpersonal Communication
- SPH 111: Public Speaking

SPH 101 has the largest enrollment. Each semester, approximately 1,100 students enroll in 50 sections of Introduction to Speech Communication, a traditional hybrid course covering communication theory, interpersonal communication, group discussion, and public speaking. In addition to the above courses, the department offers elective courses in speech communication as well as courses in theatre and media¹

FACULTY SURVEY RESULTS

It is the contention of this paper that the success of the department at Prince George's Community College can be attributed to two related phenomena. As previously indicated, one factor is 24 years of leadership by a strong, professionally active, and politically savvy chairperson who has instilled these same qualities in the department's faculty. The second factor is the resulting initiatives of faculty members who understand the extent to which the department's survival and growth depend on its credibility and visibility on- and off-campus.

Although there is much to be gleaned from the survey of full-time faculty members, several features stand out as evidence of strategies that have guaranteed the department's survival and growth.

LET'S GET POLITICAL: STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL AND GROWTH

Survival of the politically fittest is the law governing the maintenance and growth of many academic departments. Only the naive would deny that political considerations underlie or affect many decisions made in academia. Despite lofty ideals and scholarly disputations, the day is often won by those who understand and can navigate the political geography of a college.

The strategies that have helped the Speech Communication and Theatre Department at

Prince George's Community College survive and grow can be recast into more general principles that have applicability for communication departments at two- and four-year colleges and universities. These principles represent this writer's conclusions and do not, necessarily, represent the views of faculty members in the department of Speech Communication and Theatre at Prince George's Community College. However, personal experience working with SCA colleagues from all sizes and types of institutions of higher learning suggests that these principles are evident at many successful speech communication departments throughout the country. As Berko concluded, "Being threatened for elimination or downsizing also results from the political naiveté... (p. 3)."

Avoid Isolation

Don't let your department become the silent tree that falls in the forest. In the report of the 1994 State of the Field of Communication Conference, Thomas McCain blamed the Ohio State University department's survival crisis, in part, on its isolation. "We created an island," he said. "Building necessary connections across the college is essential."

At PGCC, such connections are ubiquitous and take many forms: co-directing major grant projects with faculty from other disciplines, serving on critical, campuswide committees, volunteering to conduct communication workshops for administrators, faculty, staff, and students, and working in interdisciplinary programs (e.g., Writing Center, Faculty Mentor Program). Co-directing a grant project with senior faculty from history, philosophy, and literature enhanced the scholarly credibility of the Speech Communication and Theatre Department and discipline. Serving on or chairing accreditation committees helped highlight the centrality of speech communication to the teaching/learning process and featured speech faculty as skilled group facilitators. Volunteering to conduct communication workshops demonstrated the immediacy and scope of the speech communication field. The commitment to reach out and touch someone in other areas of the college and community has increased the department's visibility, credibility, and political clout. Obviously the type and scope of such activities will differ at each institution. What is critical is understanding the need to avoid political isolation. Racking up journal publications or teaching awards will not save a department unless those achievements are visible and credible within scholarly, pedagogical, and/or political circles.

Pursue Political Positioning

Certain offices, committees, and special assignments have the potential to produce political payoffs for any academic department. As voiced in the "State of the Field" report by Stanford University's Don Roberts:

One of the almost archetypal strategies in many departments is "The best thing you can do with your dead wood is get 'em on a university committee because they're not doing anything here." And we're cutting our own throats. Those of us who are spending hour after hour after hour trying to get the next article written—we don't want to serve on those committees—and, therefore, we give it to probably just the people that should not be serving on those committees, if we want to be central in the university, and if we want to be perceived as important.

Positioning faculty members near or within important political units is as important as exceptional teaching and publishing. At Prince George's Community College, faculty members served in the following politically-important positions during the 1993-1994 academic year: (1) Faculty Senate vice president, (2) academic assistant to the vice president for Instruction, (3) coordinator of Marketing for the vice president for Advancement and

Planning, (4) members of critical committees and task forces such as the General Education Task Force, Middle States Accreditation Study Groups, and the Cross-Cultural Education Advisory Council. At a less formal level, faculty members served in capacities such as the college president's speech writer, editor of the instructional area newsletter, and occasional speakers to the Board of Trustees (e.g., forensics team coach, vice-president of the Faculty Senate, award recipients). Ensuring that department members sit in politically important positions involves more than a general commitment to avoid isolation. Regardless of the type or size of a college, political positioning requires a well-planned strategy that puts faculty members in the right place at the right political time.

Seek and Support Strong Leadership

Strong leadership is critical to a department's survival and growth. Asking faculty members to make professional development a priority is a hollow request if the leader is not an active professional. Asking faculty members to volunteer for campus service is disingenuous if the department chairperson avoids such involvement. Preaching the value of scholarship, publication records, or teaching effectiveness is hypocritical if the department chairperson does not practice what he or she preaches.

Leading by example, however, is not enough. A strong department chairperson also must assume responsibility for running an efficient department. Very often, the cost of such efficiency is hours of work on "administrivia." Putting out brush fires, anticipating administrative resistance, and minding the store are not the most enjoyable of tasks but are critical to the health of an academic department. As an outside observer, I find it curious that university departments searching for the most published or prestigious scholar to fill a chairperson's seat may sacrifice the political advantage that accompanies hiring an experienced and effective administrator to lead the department.

Even if a department chairperson leads by example and demonstrates administrative acumen, faculty members also need a loyal and supportive chairperson. The safeguards of academic freedom and tenure can be meaningless if a department chairperson and colleagues are not willing to protect and defend each other. Good faculty are jettisoned along with the bad when departments are abolished. There is great security and resulting personal confidence when the department and its chair stand willing and able to guard the faculty from harm. Risk-taking is more likely to occur when faculty members are sure that honest mistakes will be forgiven and even used to improve subsequent actions. Entrepreneurial spirit can flourish when faculty members work in a climate that encourages and rewards initiative. The philosophy, administrative style, and example of a chairperson can be the most important variable in determining whether faculty members seek new challenges or avoid everything but their minimum job requirements.

Capitalize on the Contributions of Adjunct Faculty

Among the most abused and ignored American professionals are the part-time faculty members in higher education. Adjunct faculty can expand a curriculum and guarantee the security of full-time teaching positions. Departments in trouble often fail to capitalize on the contributions of these part-time faculty members.

At the most basic level, the quality of adjunct faculty can have a direct bearing on the reputation of a department. Beyond this critical function, adjunct faculty also can lend value to a department in the areas of student recruitment, community support and prestige, and program enrichment. At community colleges, qualified high school teachers often teach part-time courses. Not only are these faculty members pleased to teach a more advanced level course, they also can become recruiters-without-portfolios. The same could be said for graduate schools that hire faculty members from other local colleges. Adjunct faculty members also may hold important positions within the community that surrounds a college.

Speech communication majors become lawyers, government officials, broadcasters, and business leaders. With a master's degree, they also can become adjunct faculty members who extend the reputation and credibility of a department beyond campus boundaries. Just as premier universities seek national leaders for special faculty appointments, all colleges can benefit by seeking adjunct faculty members who are community leaders. Finally, well-selected adjunct faculty members can enrich a program by bringing exceptional backgrounds and skills to the department. At the University of Maryland, for example, the newly-elected governor taught a government course to undergraduates during his tenure as county executive. At Prince George's Community College, an award-winning actor taught speech and theatre courses for many years and directed several outstanding theatre productions.

Although part-time faculty members cannot and should not take the place of critical full-time faculty, they deserve much more support than they usually receive. In addition to mentoring new adjunct faculty members, departments should invite part-time faculty members to participate in professional development activities and department meetings discussing issues related to their teaching areas. Strong departments acknowledge and value their adjunct faculty. When part-time faculty members feel welcome and valued, they also will be more willing to invest extra effort in the department that has treated them so well.

Develop Departmental Cohesiveness, Vigilance, and Vision

Regardless of whether a faculty member serves as an academic assistant to the vice president for Instruction or as a part-time faculty member, the department must agree that all tasks are equally important to its survival. Jealousy and defensiveness can be minimized if the task of directing a major research grant or teaching five classes is as valued as serving on a collegewide task force or coaching the forensics team. For example, it is not surprising that PGCC faculty members who teach five classes a semester are less likely to serve on a major task force or direct a collegewide program. These in-the-trenches faculty members may be less active on campus, but can be very active in professional associations and community-based organizations. When a department avoids isolation, pursues political positioning, seeks and supports strong leadership, and capitalizes on the contributions of adjunct faculty, cohesiveness, vigilance, and a shared vision are the natural outcome. Cohesiveness provides a united front of colleagues, vigilance provides the wariness necessary to detect potential problems, and vision sustains departmental achievement and pride.

Cohesiveness, vigilance, and vision also give a department and its members the right and freedom to take strong stands on critical issues. They provide a climate in which faculty productivity is supported and rewarded at both the professional and personal level. In such a department, arrogance and selfishness are the only taboos. Strong and politically active departments are good for faculty, good for students, good for the college, and, as a result, good for the discipline.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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¹Additional courses offered by the department of Speech Communication and Theatre include the following: Basic Oral American English for the Non-native Speaker, Basic Oral Communication Skills, Argumentation and Debate, Voice and Diction, Interviewing, Oral Interpretation of Literature, Intercultural Communication, Applied Speech Communication and Theatre, Introduction to Radio, Television, and Film, Television Production: Studio, Introduction to Radio, Introduction to Film, Television Production: Field Producing and

Editing, Introduction to Theatre, Play Production, Introduction to Stage Makeup, Technical Theatre, Principles of Acting I, Principles of Acting II.

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