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The Importance of Protocol

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HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

University presidents often complain that academe has lost its sense of proper protocol.

Stories abound of students disgruntled over a bad grade or faculty members disenchanted with a departmental policy who leap over several layers of authority to take their concerns directly to the provost or the president -- or even, at times, to a university trustee.

People seem to have no qualms about approaching any university official whom they believe can bring about a desired result, regardless of the institution's explicit procedure for addressing such concerns. I know of one incident in which an undergraduate accounting major complained directly to the provost that her department refused to offer a required class that she needed at a time convenient for her schedule. She demanded that he immediately open another section of the class.

In similar fashion, an associate professor of engineering e-mailed his university's president to complain that his department failed to honor his request to teach a favorite graduate course. He pleaded for presidential intercession.

In those and countless other scenarios, the complainant chose not to follow the accepted procedure and instead opted to go over the heads of one or more responsible officials.

The loss of professional etiquette is often attributed to a culture of entitlement that seems to characterize not only academe but contemporary society as a whole. Personal desires and aspirations seem to trump any concern for the greater good.

Whether that sense of entitlement is a result of a consumerist society encroaching on the rarefied terrain of academe, or of baby-boomers' pampering of their children, the fact remains that the time-honored, orderly, and collegial way of dealing with issues in academe seems to be deteriorating.

E-mail has contributed to the problem. The e-mail addresses of even the highest-ranking officials are readily accessible, and so many individuals feel free to communicate directly with someone at the top of an organization rather than with the appropriate accountable officer.

And the immediacy of electronic communication militates against an environment of carefully reasoned dialogue. E-mail invites people to fire off messages in exasperation or frustration without first calmly considering the consequences. As a result, university officials find themselves dealing on a daily basis with increasingly more inappropriate petitions.

Following proper protocol is a sign of respect both for academe's system of etiquette and for the individuals involved. Protocol -- not to mention common sense -- dictates that students who are concerned about a

grade should first communicate with their instructor. If, after attempting to resolve the issue that way, students still believe some wrong has been perpetrated, then -- and only then -- should they pursue the next step in whatever procedure is in play at the institution.

The student owes the instructor the courtesy of allowing him or her to determine whether a mistake was made and, if not, to explain why the grade was justified. Rushing off to complain to a department head -- or, worse, to a dean, provost, or president -- deprives the instructor of the ability to address the issue before it grows unnecessarily into a larger problem.

In fact, complaining first to a higher authority seems to imply that the instructor *ipso facto* has done some wrong before he or she has been afforded the opportunity to set the record straight.

Protocol works in an identical fashion at other levels in academe. When a faculty member chooses to bring a departmental issue to the dean rather than first attempting to resolve it with the department head or colleagues -- or when a department chair chooses to skip over the dean and bring an issue first to the provost -- those actions rob the accountable officer of the ability (and responsibility) to address the problem.

If, as dean, I chose to present an academic-affairs issue directly to the president rather than to the provost, it would not only be an affront to the provost, it would tag me in the eyes of others as someone who either didn't understand how the rules work or was willfully setting aside the rules simply because I wished the issue to be dealt with more expeditiously than it might have been otherwise.

But if your true objective is resolution (as opposed to, say, making someone look bad to a superior), then skipping levels of authority is a distinctly inefficient way to proceed.

For example, what typically happens when a complaint arrives on the president's desk is that it is forwarded down the chain until it reaches the level where it should have been addressed in the first place. Sending a complaint about a grade to the president doesn't produce a faster result than dealing with it in the department because the president will ask the provost to deal with the issue; the provost will, in turn, ask the dean to look into the case; the dean will then direct the department head to investigate.

Clearly, it would have been much more efficient to begin at the departmental level in the first place.

Violating professional etiquette can result in significant unwelcome consequences. When you knowingly go around someone, you, in effect, are saying, "I'm more important than the process." At the very least, it makes you appear selfish. Even worse, leaving someone out of the loop may cause that person to believe you are hostile, a perception certain to create lasting ill will.

In a more general sense, ignoring protocol creates an atmosphere of suspicion that fuels an "us versus them" climate.

Perhaps some people confuse academe's increasing commitment to transparency and openness with an invitation to approach any official likely to get them what they want. Transparency and openness mean that an administration is committed to decision making in the sunshine, that the mechanisms of decision making are clear, and that the records of such decisions are readily available.

Similarly, an administrator who advertises an open-door policy is not inviting everyone to violate protocol. That policy merely signals that an administrator is available to be called upon within the institution's usual procedures for conducting business. It doesn't mean anyone can walk into an official's office and demand action.

In short, those who knowingly ignore protocol abuse the system, insult those involved, and risk tarnishing

their own reputation.

And proper protocol works in both directions. If, as dean, I wished to invite a faculty member in the School of Communication to help the college produce a video celebrating its anniversary, professional courtesy would dictate that I first inform the faculty member's department head. The chair would surely feel blindsided to learn of the project through hallway gossip.

Some administrators make it a habit, whenever they communicate with someone below their level of authority, to "copy" the recipient's supervisor. That practice ensures that the right people are always in the loop. It's not just a matter of professional courtesy; it's a professional responsibility.

I don't mean to suggest that no one should ever skip a level of authority. If you have a legitimate personal complaint against the person you report to, then it is clearly fitting to bring the issue to the next level. Or if the process on one level has been exhausted, it might be time to move to the next level. Those are the natural and appropriate courses of action, and that is precisely what it means to follow proper protocol.

And I don't mean to suggest that responsibility lies only with those who attempt to circumvent the process. If administrators themselves would consistently respect protocol, they could avoid the many attempts to get them to intervene inappropriately. But, too often, administrators are tempted to try to "fix" a problem brought to their attention rather than refer the petitioner to the proper level.

The more we as administrators give in to such temptations, the more we invite others to attempt end runs.

Arguing that we should adhere to academe's system of professional etiquette is not a defense of tradition for tradition's sake. It is an appeal to act responsibly -- to avoid falling prey to the immediacy of e-mail, to instant gratification, to the temptation to damage someone's reputation, or to any of the other motives that cause us to violate academic propriety.

As in the world beyond academe, good etiquette promotes good will; its absence fosters resentment and discontent.

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