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What Conspiracy?

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HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

It has become a cliché among professors to speak of power relations within the university setting in adversarial terms -- as a matter of "us" (the faculty) versus "them" (by which is usually meant all administrators from the lowliest department head to the university president).

Chairs, deans, provosts, vice presidents, and presidents are lumped together in a monolithic cabal -- "the administration"-- all the members of which are thought to operate with lockstep consistency, presumably to advance some identical (but unspoken) agenda.

In fact, it is not unusual to hear faculty members use the language of conspiracy to characterize a campus squabble:

- A colleague of mine on the West Coast once informed me that her administration had set out to "destroy" the faculty and to replace all tenure-track professors with adjuncts.
- Another colleague insists that his department head and "all the other administrators" are working to turn faculty members into nothing more than 40-hour-a-week workers who soon will be required, if not to punch a time clock, at least to account for their time on the job.
- A dean in the Southeast complained that the faculty in one of her departments refused to adopt a curricular change that would have revitalized the department simply because she had been the first to champion the change; the faculty claimed to be "wary of top-down management."

Such sentiments express a range of quite genuine frustrations in higher education now -- a time marked by tight budgets, increased governmental and corporate interference, and a distinctly consumerist attitude on the part of students and their parents. Nonetheless, depicting campus administrators as participants in some organized conspiracy against faculty members is unproductive.

It also obscures the fact that in most cases, we administrators (yes, as a dean, I am one of "them") share the exact same values and goals as faculty members; we just inhabit different roles and have very different day-to-day concerns. Most administrators hold faculty rank. Do you really think our to-do list reads: dismantle tenure, eliminate academic freedom, turn professors into automatons?

The "us versus them" rhetoric obscures the complexity of academic leadership. But it is easy to conjure up a conspiracy if you are unfamiliar with the facts -- namely, that in any university of any size (and probably in every institution, regardless of size), the administration is composed of a collection of individuals each of whom represents a distinct constituency and an academic unit replete with its own specific mission, goals, and needs.

By definition, the mission, goals, and needs of an academic unit are necessarily in competition with those of other units. Each unit will compete for what it sees as its portion of the pie to support its own unique agenda. Coming to terms with that dynamic is essential to understanding academic leadership and developing a much-needed culture of trust in higher education.

Everyone understands, for example, that within a college, each department competes directly and by design with other departments for the same pool of resources. Whether it be the opportunity to hire a new faculty member, increase the operating budget, upgrade computers or scientific instruments, or expand the number of graduate assistantships, some formal process of proposal and justification usually will be put in play.

The dean's office, guided by a faculty committee, is then charged with sorting through the proposals and determining which ones to support. It is entirely appropriate for each department to be asked to make a compelling argument as to why it should receive the resources rather than some other department.

Clearly, in that scenario the department heads are hardly in collusion with one another against the faculty. In fact, their job is to serve as the principal advocates for their department's faculty, staff, and programs. Nor in that scenario are the department heads in cahoots with the dean, since the dean's job is to sort through the many worthy proposals and make the difficult choice about which of them will best advance the college's mission and goals.

In a similar vein, a dean competes directly and by design with the deans of other colleges for the same pool of resources. Well before the academic departments engage in a process of proposal and justification, the colleges will have done the same; and the provost -- like the dean on the college level -- will need to weigh the many worthy requests.

Should the institution put a much-needed infusion of cash into the library, invest in a new doctoral program in the college of education, support a new law review in the law school, or finance an initiative to increase SAT scores of incoming students by spending more on student recruitment?

To imagine the department heads, the deans, and the provost in a relationship of conspiracy is to fail to notice that every administrator is preoccupied with defending and advocating for his or her own unit -- more often than not over and against other units and their administrators.

And the competition doesn't end (or begin) in academic affairs. The identical dynamic is in play at the vice-presidential level, too. Well before the provost opens up the formal competition for resources within academic affairs, the university president will have opened up a similar process among the vice presidents of student affairs, academic affairs, finance, advancement, and the like. Deteriorating residence halls will do battle with parking problems, campus security, aging buildings, computer systems, and athletic programs, among many other competing priorities. What's more, the president's main priority may be completely different from those of the vice presidents.

Throughout the long process of negotiation at all of those different levels, some administrators may well be ineffective advocates. We administrators do not always make the wisest decisions. Some observers may misconstrue that ineffectiveness or injudiciousness as a lack of support or, worse, as evidence of a concerted conspiracy against faculty or staff interests.

But interpreting ineffective advocacy or bad decision-making as active obstruction is to forget the academic leader's *raison d'être*: to serve as the chief advocate for his or her unit.

Is the process of proposal, justification, and advocacy agonistic? Yes, somewhat, but it is also healthy: Each unit within the institution should be able to justify the good things it has to offer and to make a cogent case as to why they should be supported. That process keeps us all from growing stagnant and taking our

programs -- academic and otherwise -- for granted. It helps us keep in focus why we have devoted our lives to academe in the first place.

Administrators may well find themselves in agreement from time to time on one issue or another, but the fact is that any institution is composed of a number of self-contained (though interrelated) areas, and each leader will be busy making the best case possible for his or her area.

Far from a grand us-versus-them conspiracy, the scenario you will find without fail in every institution will be the same: Each administrator arguing vociferously and tenaciously for his or her faculty, staff, and programs. You personally will not be present each time that advocacy takes place, but you can rest assured that it is happening nonstop. It is impossible for an institution to thrive otherwise.

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