



Troubled Departments

by Richard Wheeler

Emeritus Professor (English) And Emeritus Dean (Graduate College) University Of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

What are the indicators of a department in need of help from outside itself and beyond the ordinary administrative support the academic structure of a university should provide? Who is responsible for identifying these indicators, determining if they merit intervention, and providing the help needed to address them? What are the chances of success?

Ultimately, the questions come down to what dimensions of the department impede its capacity:

- to provide an acceptably high quality and volume of instruction
- to produce research or creative activities that meet university standards
- to contribute to the overall well-being of the university through teaching and service
- to conduct its own internal governance equitably and without running afoul of ethical, legal, and financial standards.

Good departments will exceed the norm in all or most of these areas. Troubled departments are likely to present problems in more than one of them.

Serious problems in any of these areas are not likely to have sprung up overnight. They have a history, and they have inertia rooted in that history. New developments generated within the department are more likely to grow out of and extend that inertia than out of inspired reform. If your efforts to address the problems of a department are going to have a reasonable chance at success (and I'm sorry to be stating what must seem obvious here, but I do so because it is not a practice always followed), it is important to understand with as much precision as possible the nature of the problem you are trying to address. Arriving at that understanding will include developing a pretty good understanding of how the problem has developed over time – its history.

As with any past, there will be several stories or myths that attempt to explain it. The various stories are often inconsistent with one another, and even wildly contradictory. If you are a dean, you and probably your predecessor(s) are likely to be implicated in these stories, often in ways you will not enjoy.

Most of the problems that plague a troubled department are generated within the boundaries that shape and define the work of the department, but it is not unusual for components of larger college or university structures to contribute to them. In dealing with the department, you should be clear about anything in this area. It is not uncommon for departments to look outside themselves to explain the causes for their problems, and you are likely to hear complaints focused on such causes. Such claims rarely carry the importance attributed to them, but they may reflect a partial truth, and if they do, and you don't find some way to acknowledge it, you will lose credibility.





Your own credibility is crucial. Key members of the department will need to believe you have their best interests in mind, that you have made a serious effort to understand the situation in the department, and that what you have identified as serious issues are indeed serious. They must also believe you are in earnest in moving the department in a different direction. Tough talk not followed up with actions will make things worse. For example, don't threaten to cut off future hires unless you are prepared to do so. If the problem is a slide into mediocrity or worse, do not approve new appointments or recommendations for tenure and promotion that will extend that slide. Making the right new appointments is particularly crucial, and you may find that departmental search committees need to be augmented with experienced academics from other, kindred departments that better meet the university's expectations for quality and productivity. And as for tenure decisions – very often the problems you are trying to address will be closely tied to bad tenure decisions years in the past.

Department leadership will be pivotal to any steps taken to address departmental issues. Does the person currently chairing the department have the strength, persistence, and resolve, and does s/he command the respect, necessary to take on problems many in the department will not wish to take on, or even be inclined to recognize as problems. If so, what help does the chair need? If not, where do you find someone who has these qualities to take on the job for a bit?

Expectations for improvement should be established through, and carefully based on, your assessment of the troubling department issues. Many different kinds of problems can rise to a level of intensity that calls for administrative intervention from the next level up, and they will call for different approaches, require different timelines, and, for that matter, present you with different odds on the chances for success. A fragmented, factionalized faculty, a severe decline in scholarly quality and productivity, clear neglect of classroom responsibilities and opportunities, open rebellion against a department chair, an extensive history of weak leadership, a department culture that has long tolerated what should be intolerable behavior such as sexual harassment and bullying, the failure to provide conditions in which newly hired tenure stream faculty can thrive, or a tenured rogue faculty member who causes problems on every front with some combination of poor teaching, shoddy research, disruptive behavior, and public relations – these are all very different kinds of problems. None of them will solve itself, and most of them cannot be addressed effectively without some form of help coming from outside the department.

It is important not to overestimate your powers in providing that assistance. Set realistic goals and time frames based on a very careful effort to understand the nature and the root causes of the issues you choose to address.

It is equally important not to underestimate the importance of decisive action based on a thoughtful analysis of the issues. If you don't deal effectively with the issue, the chances are good that your successor will have to deal with an even more intractable version of it.

In my own experience, when I became a department head in the late 80s, the previous department head had been run off by the department, and the head prior to that had been run off by the school and college. If not having been run off by either counts as success, I believe I can attribute much of that success to a small number of components:



- the aggressive and effective handling of a sexual harassment issue that had been swept under the rug for years, and my decision not to support a positive promotion and tenure recommendation made by a department that knew better but counted on a negative decision to come at the next level, both imparted important lessons of the department's responsibilities to itself and the university
- the concentration of all available departmental resources in conducting a series of exceptionally successful searches for new assistant professors made it clear that the department needed to look to its future
- listening carefully to folks from all factions and distributing responsibility for department operations as equitably as possible helped to enforce a sense of the department as a unit as well as a collection of disparate and at time warring interests.

A decade or so later, after I thought I had gotten out of the academic administrative business, I found myself as acting head of a social science department that was impeded, and probably damaging itself, by a kind of raucous internal dynamic. I found assuming the leadership role (by the dean's appointment, not a department selection process) of that department, of which I was not a member, and had no extensive knowledge, to be great fun. Only half-jokingly I once suggested that all department heads should be rotated through departments other than their own – not only to increase their understanding of what it is to be a department head, but because the department culture is then exposed to a leadership style that stands apart from that culture and can bring what I think can be an invaluable perspective on it. In any event, I found (and I believe the department did as well) that some things got moving in a better direction, often simply because I kept asking variants of a simple question: why do you do X, or Y, or Z this way? And when the answer was, well, that's the way we've always done it, it wasn't hard to open up the question to whether it made any sense to go on doing it this way, whether there might not be a better way to shape a practice. For example: the large introductory lecture course that meets a general education requirement and also should serve as a powerful recruiting tool to spike the interest of students in your advanced courses and major is taught by an inexperienced, untenured assistant professor who is struggling to get past an unpromising start to his research, and who can barely speak understandable English – does this seem like a good idea to you ... ?

This department responded well to an outside intervention in large part because its core strengths were basically sound, although inter-departmental disciplinary disputes, a few disruptive personalities, an odd sort of insularity, and a loss of unit-focus were presenting what the next administrative level up perceived to be serious problems.

My next opportunity to work with a troubled department posed more vexing issues. I was a part time associate or vice provost when the provost asked me to work with another social science department in the college of arts and sciences that had just driven off a well-intentioned but ineffective head. I didn't chair this department, but I did talk someone else into doing it, though not until after the first person I asked said he would rather dip his hair in gasoline and set it on fire than chair this department. The person I asked to serve as interim head, from inside the department, provided enough stability to prevent further deterioration for a couple years, when a newly appointed and



highly gifted dean was able to work more closely with the department and to conduct a search that produced a capable head.

This department was deeply factionalized, mostly along lines that reflected an inappropriately narrow disciplinary range in a broadly based discipline, although the tensions were great enough that they could occasionally produce alliances across sub-disciplinary biases and even personal hostilities. The national reputation of this department was still in a years' long slide. It was swamped by undergraduate students, and did not use its diminished resources to teach them effectively. Those resources were diminished primarily because the department could not hold alienated faculty – not promising assistant professors, and not highly productive scholars who were not tied to the location by spousal or familial relations.

Apart from arranging for temporary leadership, my main contribution was simply to talk to everyone in the department, many of them multiple times, and to many others, including faculty from other departments in the same field across the country. Scolding didn't help – it never does – but what helped some were very frankly stated assessments of what the department looked like from outside itself, how internal dynamics were producing damage and preventing progress, how costly in every respect it was to cling to a culture that alienated productive faculty on whom the future of the department depended. I believe it was useful to many members of the faculty to get a clearer sense of what the department looked like to the rest of the college, the campus, and the world of its discipline around the country. It was also useful, I think, for several faculty members to hear, if only indirectly, through me, what the department looked like to the many other members of it with whom they never spoke. There were, alas, folks in the mix who seemed to take pleasure in seeing the problems generated by their animosities. But in most cases, one could talk things through to a point where key department members began to recognize how their own behaviors – whatever their motivations – were making things worse and not better. I wasn't really around for the last stages of what became a prolonged effort to work with this unit, but, largely because of the work of the dean and the department head she was able to appoint, things are better now than they were a few years ago.