1983

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Improving Academic Departments

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The time is right for increased use of departmental models for improving teaching and learning. Several trends in higher education support their use.

Firstly, colleges and universities have new student populations (e.g., older students, more part-time students with poor academic preparation). Many institutions and departments need help in making changes to better meet the learning styles and pragmatic needs of these learners.

Secondly, decreased faculty mobility means departments go without the "new blood" they once had. Though this stability can have positive outcomes, negative ones are often seen. Examples include being stuck in old personality clashes, trapped in dysfunctional meeting patterns, wedded to an outdated curriculum and stalled in individual course content. Low turn-over and high tenure ratios can also mean boredom. With the absence of questions and perspectives from new faculty, the impetus for change is often absent. Faculty then miss the revitalizing experience of exploring existing procedures and experimenting with new approaches.

Thirdly, funds for instructional development are tight on most campuses. A departmental approach to instructional development requires fewer staff than does an individualized approach. As this article is designed to show, the outcomes are also often more far-reaching.
In short, the effectiveness of higher education is being challenged. Development work with departments may be one way to help institutions stay vital for both students and faculty.

**Individual VS. Departmental Development Models**

Most faculty developmental efforts focus on individual faculty (Centra, 1976). Consultation occurs individually or in workshops designed to help professors improve their instructional skills or individual courses (Gaff, 1975; Bergquist and Phillips, 1975). Recipients of these services frequently report positive outcomes (Erickson and Erickson, 1979; Gaff, 1979). However, limited numbers of faculty avail themselves of this type of help (Seldin, 1981) and few can be served given the large staff-time investment in these models. When faculty do use these services, they often find themselves in the difficult and discouraging position of trying to change their style of teaching and/or course content in a department which is functioning in its traditional style and with its standard curriculum.

Departmental development models provide a needed alternative approach (Boyer and Crocett, 1973; Riechmann, 1978; Miller and Whitcomb, 1981). Here, faculty work together as a unit through special departmental meetings and smaller task groups. Issues of program requirements, total curriculum and departmental functioning are considered along with instructional methods and individual course design.

Positive outcomes of this departmental approach include:

- An integrated and current curriculum.
- Program requirements that ensure depth and breadth, while considering scheduling needs and previous experience of students.
- Productive faculty meeting practices which enhance the likelihood that the department will be able to effectively work with later educational issues.
- Creation of a supportive climate which improves morale and strengthens a sense of collegiality.
- Individual teaching improvement efforts which are better understood, more encouraged and less isolated.
More concrete examples of these outcomes are improved working relationships between the department head and faculty, improved ability of faculty to talk productively with each other, development of new courses, institution of routine examination of students' prior learning, team teaching, elimination of gaps and overlaps in the curriculum, revitalized willingness to share resources and a new enthusiasm for working with colleagues.

In summary, individual development efforts have proven effective. However, the more far-reaching outcomes mentioned above from working with whole departments merit increased implementation.

Sample Models

Three approaches to departmental development are described. These can be labeled "instructional," "curricular," and "organizational." Each has a different initial focus but, eventually, all touch on issues of instructional methods, curriculum development and departmental functioning. All share concern with the production of better learning opportunities for students and a more satisfying work situation for faculty.

The same general steps occur in all three models. These steps, listed below, are similar to those components of most organizational change efforts (e.g., Schein, 1969; Havlock, 1973; Lippitt and Lippitt, 1978; Pilon and Bergquist, 1979).

1. initial departmental contact, contracting and assessment
2. data collection and analysis of data
3. clarification of desired state or/and problem prioritization
4. planning for change
5. implementation of development activities
6. assessment and planning for future activities

As indicated above, these steps are utilized in identifying and improving both the instructional and operational component of departmental functioning.

Instructional model. In the instructional model, initial data collection occurs concerning the teaching of each individual in the department. The data collection strategy is drawn directly from the
individualized teaching improvement process developed by the Clinic to Improve University Teaching and the University of Massachusetts in Amherst (Bergquist and Phillips, 1977). In brief, this process involves an initial in-depth interview with each faculty member, use of multiple data sources about the person’s teaching (video-tape, observation, student data, teacher self assessment and prediction of student rating), planning for change, implementing new approaches and finally reassessing for strengths and any further change.

After the initial determination of strengths and weaknesses, the departmental model diverges from the individual approach. In one-to-one consultation, improvement work occurs in areas selected by the individual in consultation with the teaching consultant (TC). In the departmental version, identification of strengths and weaknesses is done with pooled data from all faculty.

The pooled data served as the basis for planning departmental improvement efforts. In meeting with all the faculty, common teaching strengths and weaknesses are identified and discussed. From this analysis and more general deliberation, topics are selected for further group work. Workshops on selected teaching methods are usually the first follow-up activity; however, other topics emerge for further work. These have included reduction of overlap between courses in what is taught in the first weeks of the semester, development and utilization of visual aids which have department wide application, development of a pre-test for advancement into upperlevel courses and improvement of testing skills.

The instructional model has two main strengths. Firstly, through the individualized process, each faculty member gets usable information pertaining to his/her teaching early in the project. Secondly, a good rapport is established between improvement staff and faculty before group work begins. The model is particularly useful with departments that have expressed a desire to work on teaching skills, or that are hesitant about initially committing the time needed for curricular changes or group projects. A limitation of this model is that it can be difficult building momentum to move away from the individual focus toward group activities and unit changes. A focused, structured presentation of departmental data and clear options for group activities are critical for moving this model forward.
Curriculum model. In this second approach, the initial focus is on the curriculum. However, the basic steps are still data collection, problem assessment, and action planning. It starts with assessing the content of individual courses and then moves to an analysis of gaps and overlaps in the curriculum of the whole department or of programs within the department. Again, how the department handles these issues is also important.

Interviews are conducted with each teacher in the department. Central questions focus on course goals, content, and prerequisites. Related questions probe for descriptions of students, what is going well and not well with courses, what content areas the teacher would like to teach or stop teaching, what curriculum changes he or she would like to see made in the department, and what aspects of the department facilitate or hinder curriculum innovation and effectiveness. The more general of these questions are also asked of students.

Data from faculty and students are summarized and presented in a written document which is distributed to department members. Faculty, and sometimes students, are then brought together to analyze these data and determine where curriculum changes could best begin. These starting points have included: offering a new integrative seminar; clarifying departmental goals; developing practicum experiences; devoting regular faculty meeting to working on curricular or instructional issues; forming task forces of faculty (and/or students) to revise certain parts of the program; and holding workshops to improve relations among faculty so curriculum work can be accomplished.

This model provides an excellent opportunity for faculty to work on topics of strong mutual concern. Views of one’s discipline and education get shared. Faculty get to know each other in new ways. They also learn more about the departmental offerings which has useful outcomes for course planning and advising. This model also often leads to productive work on departmental and content coverage across the department as a whole.

A drawback to this approach is that it surfaces large amounts of data and feelings. The potential is strong for faculty to feel overwhelmed. Process consultation is critical. Consultation to the department head and training for all faculty and topics such as decision-making is also helpful.
Organizational model. Sometimes a department’s initial concern is the functioning of the unit. Examples of problems described in initial meetings include: distrust and accompanying dysfunctional work relationships between faculty and administration; decisions not made or implemented; poor attendance at meetings; lack of action by the chairperson and factions that have isolated themselves from departmental activities. In cases like these, faculty, including appropriate administrators, are brought together to improve group-functioning and organizational practices so work on educational concerns can proceed.

As suggested above, both process and content needs are typically identified in the early stages of this model. Process concerns focus on interactions and ineffective functioning of the group (e.g., not listening, not making decisions, failure to implement decisions, not keeping records). Content issues have to do with educational issues needing attention (e.g., accreditation, reorganization, curriculum).

In most cases, separate special activities must be planned to work on the first need area. The inability of a department to work together effectively almost precludes effectiveness on educational issues. These sessions can include communication skills exercises, group process skills training, practicing alternative decision making methods and leadership development. In more functional departments, the group can begin work on the educational problems while simultaneously attending to improving interpersonal relationships and group functioning.

This model emphasizes faculty learning new roles to help the department operate more effectively. Department heads receive special attention around their leadership style, structuring of work, information sharing, employment of varying decision making modes, and use of evaluation data.

Because this model places initial and emphasis in improving departmental practices, this model accomplishes the greatest structural and operational change. Attention to pragmatic and educational issues follows, but these issues do not receive the extensive early attention of the previous models. This complete cycle involves a long-time commitment but produces the most far-reaching results.
Conditions for Success.

Success of the departmental strategy hinges on a number of variables. Those which have been found to be most salient are the existence of a “felt need” within the department, faculty commitment, commitment of the department chairperson (or head), and the availability of rewards for involvement.

**Felt need.** A department is ready to begin a project if the faculty as a group see a problem and share the desire to use help in solving it. The stimulus or problem can be something as simple as the department head putting pressure on the faculty. However, it can also include poor accreditation reviews, increasing or decreasing numbers of students, hostility among faculty, reorganization of schools, departments, or programs, or the mere inability to complete required departmental tasks. The more there is a shared awareness of a need and a sense that progress can or must be made, the more likely it is that the department will make joint commitment and move rapidly on identified problems.

**Faculty support.** Departmental projects require a large time commitment on the part of faculty. In those projects which have resulted in notable change, this commitment has been as much as three hours a week for approximately two years. Faculty must understand what they are getting into, believe that it will be worthwhile for them, and be willing to make changes in their teaching role and way of relating to others. Without this type of commitment, projects may not reach conclusion and faculty morale may slip.

To build interest in the project, staff members talk with faculty about the process and the intended outcomes. Written material is provided and faculty are encouraged to talk with faculty from other departments involved in similar projects. People find that these discussions help them visualize what a project can be and formulate their own ideas about directions their project could take. Before the project officially begins, staff should require that 80% of a department agrees to participate.

**Chairperson support.** Support of the department head or chairperson is critical. Often this person will be the one who makes the initial step of contacting the improvement office. During the project, she/he is in a central position to keep track of project components, see
possible alternatives for obtaining and allocating resources, secure external policy and financial support, give people encouragement, and keep the momentum going. A chairperson who is not wholly committed can mean disaster for a project. The willingness of the chairperson to be openly supportive and to hear feedback about her/himself sets the tone of the whole intervention. As the project continues, other people assume leadership functions, but even then the support of the chairperson remains critical. Without it, faculty start to worry about the impact that participation will have on their careers and on the standing of the department within the institution. They also hesitate to raise serious concerns related directly to the functioning of the chair or other “key” figures in the department.

**Rewards.** Just as departments need a reason for undertaking a departmental project, they need to have a sense that it will make a difference. “The difference” can include reduction in teaching load, campus recognition, financial support, relief from tensions with colleagues, or increased capacity to do satisfying work. An ideal circumstance is one where individuals find intrinsic rewards for themselves and where the department, as a unit, is rewarded by the larger university or college.

**Staff Skills**

Organizing and implementing departmental projects is a complex task requiring different skills than are needed for consulting with individual faculty. In addition to being knowledgeable about instructional skills, the development staff needs to know about curriculum development, group process, basic management skills, and organizational development. They also need to be able to design and facilitate workshops, to work well as co-planners and co-facilitators and to be comfortable and effective in groups. Further description of needed skills follow.

**Instruction.** Staff need to know a variety of instructional methods, be able to diagnose instructional strengths and weaknesses, and be able to help individuals, programs, and departments create instructional procedures which will accomplish desired ends.
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**Curriculum development.** Staff need to be able to help groups determine desired outcomes for a curriculum, know models for assessing existing curricula and for designing new curricula and/or revising existing curricula.

**Group process.** Staff need the ability to understand and describe the contribution of individual behavior to group productivity and satisfaction. They need to know about effective styles and methods of communication, decision-making and leadership. They must be able to help faculty develop ways of behaving which lead to task accomplishment and positive relationships.

**Management.** Often departmental projects require coaching the chair-person and/or helping other members assume managerial functions. Skills for setting agendas, running good meetings, assigning tasks, encouraging follow-through and completion of assignments, writing proposals, making schedules, and preparing budgets are among those that are often needed.

**Organizational development.** Staff need the ability to see departments as systems interacting with and within larger systems. They need to know about organizational behavior (roles, leadership, decision-making, communication, power, conflict, conflict resolution, etc.) and models for conceptualizing and facilitating change.

**Workshop design.** They need the ability to identify needs, learner styles and capabilities, and to design activities which help people develop needed skills and/or perspectives. They are models for the faculty and therefore need to demonstrate effective use of skills as discussion leaders and innovative teachers.

**Collaboration.** Departmental projects are best handled by at least two-person teams. These projects are complex since they involve a number of people, a range of task and interpersonal issues, and people who are not used to working effectively in groups. One person's perspective can get clouded by the volume of data that needs to be considered. More than two people can be used with very large departments but, whenever possible, two people can coordinate their efforts more easily than three or more. Within and between meeting, pairs of staff help each other with planning, evaluating, and monitoring the various project components.
Because many decisions are made in the midst of meetings and because staff energy is important for moving projects forward, staff members must trust each other, value each other’s competencies, and be able to give each other feedback. Without this supportive relationship between staff, work with the unit disintegrates (e.g., tasks do not get done, information does not get communicated, tension levels get unproductive). Therefore, careful attention must be paid to selecting or training skilled development staff and to building positive working relationships between them. The development staff must spend time on their own development in addition to processing their work, sharing information, assessing current departmental needs, and designing future interventions.

Results

Several departmental projects at the University of Massachusetts were evaluated by an outside evaluator. When asked about the helpfulness of the development staff with departmental meetings and task forces, 80% of the respondents checked the highest category. The majority of written comments were in the following vein:

“We increased our willingness to listen, to control our own meetings, to support each other, to challenge each other in healthy ways.”

“We are able to confront each other better. We’re on the right track to bring about a curriculum change.”

“We have more understanding with each other. We are able to more effectively process a decision.”

“I have developed a better feeling about working relationships with colleagues.”

“I have developed more trust in colleagues.”

“I am probably asserting myself more now, largely because I feel the department could really use my opinions.”

“We came to understand the objectives of other sections within the department.”
"We now have better, more concise communications, organized meetings, a switch to a student-oriented program, greater satisfaction for us."

"Where areas of staff responsibilities were unclear before, there is now a better sense of order. Staff feel that they know each other somewhat better."

Reservations and concerns about the model dealt primarily with the time commitment involved and discomfort over behaving in new ways. Overwhelmingly, however, the effort was reported as useful and positive.

Summary

Development efforts with departments increase the likelihood of broadband educational change. Outcomes include the development of coherent curricula, strengthened teaching skills across a whole program, collegial support for instructional innovation and the implementation of departmental practices to support on-going and effective educational improvement. Implementation of departmental projects is most successful under a set of specified conditions and with a specially trained consulting staff. Evaluations of several of the models which have been described attest to the strength of this approach.
References


