Engaging the Academics

Troy D. Williamson

Troy Williamson teaches philosophy and mathematics at Texas State Technical College West Texas in Abilene, where he serves as a Senior Instructor and is the Associate Chair of General Education for the college. Williamson received his master's degree in philosophy and mathematics from Texas Tech University, and he has been a full-time faculty member at TSTC West Texas for three years. He chairs the college's Ethics Committee and is the faculty representative on the Integrated Marketing Team.

Abstract

In the midst of an evolving marketplace, institutions of higher education find themselves exploring a variety of new techniques in an effort to fulfill their missions. In order to achieve effectiveness, colleges need to take advantage of all of the resources available to them. A unique challenge lies within this realm in relation to faculty members, particularly at colleges which focus upon technical education: intentionally involving the academic faculty members in the work of the institution. In order to overcome this challenge, the reasons which typically lead academicians to be undervalued must be identified and addressed. The goal of this article is to explore what is required for colleges to recognize the relevance of their academic faculty members.

Introduction

Dramatic changes are occurring within America, bringing about significant challenges for institutions of higher education. Online learning is becoming more pervasive, team learning is being incorporated into mainstream educational practices and there is a renewed interest in the "soft skills" (sometimes referred to as "employability skills") as a part of the complete educational package. Perhaps more importantly, the Renaissance man no longer seems to be a viable possibility. The sheer amount of knowledge which mankind has amassed renders such a breadth of understanding nearly impossible in any given individual; everyone must specialize, and education, perhaps especially at the post-secondary level, is becoming more focused on specific and specialized skill sets.

The focus of this discussion addresses one particular challenge which all schools will face in light of these issues. As students become more focused upon the technical skill sets demanded by the marketplace, the traditional fine-arts and general-education curricula[1] are easily undervalued. In order for a college to achieve its mission, the academic faculty members must be intentionally involved in the life of the institution. Effectively fulfilling this goal, however, involves some far-reaching implications regarding the manner in which the academic skill sets are viewed.

Contributing Factors

There are two important factors which must be recognized as contributing to the changing climate to which colleges must respond. The first comes from an oft-cited report released in 1999. Data on job classifications in the 1950s show that professional positions accounted for approximately 20 percent of American jobs; skilled positions comprised another 20 percent of the jobs, while unskilled positions accounted for the remaining 60 percent. In the late 1990s, professional positions continued to account for 20 percent of the jobs in America. The percentages for the skilled and unskilled positions, however, had reversed; 60 percent of the positions were skilled, while only 20 percent of the positions were unskilled (*21st Century Skills for 21st Century Jobs* 1999).

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This data uncovers clear and long-term trends in the marketplace which lead to an increased need for skilled workers to sustain the American and the global economy[2]. The impact of this seems equally clear: institutions of higher education must prepare workers for these positions. This leads to an increased focus on skill sets that will equip students to compete in an evolving marketplace.

A second factor arises from the generational trends that are observed, specifically related to the Millennial Generation[3]. Among the characteristics which have been found to be prevalent within the members of this generation is the fact that these individuals seldom learn conceptually; they find it extremely difficult to read about theories and make applications on their own. Instead, the millennial students learn best relationally and in hands-on environments (Dede 2005).

The fact that these students now fill the classrooms in most colleges and universities means that new challenges are being faced within education. The job market demands that these students have certain skill sets, and the most effective way to train these students is through hands-on applications. Thus, learning that is focused on theory and conceptual tasks is on a decline, not because there is little value to these tasks, but by necessity.

There are other factors to consider, yet these seem to be the two key factors that are motivating the trends which are currently observed. As colleges seek to respond in kind, learning techniques, even institutional missions and visions, may need to be reviewed. Recruiting efforts will certainly need to be adapted, recognizing that every school is truly not for every student[4]. Institutions must identify those skill sets that they can effectively instill in their students; marketing efforts should then be targeted to students seeking those particular skills.

The Role of Academic Faculty Members

There are certain areas in which academic faculty members are typically engaged in the overall life of a college. They might serve on intellectual property committees, because these faculty members are generally interested and involved in research and publication. Having an academician serve on the school's ethics committee is another natural way to utilize the special skills possessed by these faculty members—particularly, in this instance, a professor of philosophy.

There are also other opportunities for involvement. At Texas State Technical College West Texas, the academic faculty members are heavily involved in distance learning utilizing interactive television. Inviting some of these faculty members to serve on the Technology Users Committee, providing input to the technicians on how the system is working overall, and what capabilities might be needed to enhance the classroom environment, is fitting in this context.

"What skills do academic faculty members have to offer?"

Such connections are natural. They are, however, overlooked at times. In various ways, whether intentional or not, academic faculty members might be overlooked in terms of their potential involvement. Traditional colleges and universities will continue to have students who major in English, mathematics, history, or other such academic disciplines. These departments are not necessarily those which garner attention for the school; instead, the business school, the engineering or architectural program, the computer science department, and other technology or career-oriented disciplines seem to be where the spotlight is usually focused. Thus, the college might lean on faculty members from those visible areas to serve when academic faculty members could easily be involved.

The situation is worse at technical institutions or other colleges where specific types of skill sets are offered. In these instances, academic faculty members are perhaps, unintentionally, relegated to a second-class status. These faculty members do not advise students, since they do not have students majoring in their programs. The reason academic faculty members exist on these campuses is to serve the needs of the other disciplines. The end result can erode to the point that the academic disciplines are not recognized as having skills to offer to the college, and they are often overlooked for this very reason.

The Academic Skills

What skills do academic faculty members have to offer? They are myriad, even when speaking solely about those skills related specifically to the disciplines that these

individuals have studied (i.e., overlooking personality characteristics). More and more, schools understand the need for data-informed decision making, meaning that they are involving themselves in research and data-gathering efforts. Those trained in the sciences, whether the "hard" natural sciences or the "soft" social sciences, have been trained in research methods. They have a valuable skill to offer to the institution.

In many disciplines, planning is one of the skills paramount to the tasks performed. This includes, once again, the sciences, although disciplines such as English also require this skill (e.g., a well-written essay must be carefully planned). This is a very basic type of thing that can easily go unidentified because the academic disciplines are, perhaps, too familiar. It is easy to fail to recognize, or remember, the foundational skills that the discipline seeks to impart to its students.

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What about engaging those faculty members who teach a foreign language in endeavors that require creative thinking? Languages are structured differently, and becoming fluent in a language means learning to think in that language. Thus, those who are fluent in multiple languages have complex thought patterns which they may be able to tap in order to escape the proverbial box.

Another easily overlooked area is that of problem-solving. What scientist or mathematician does not enjoy a good problem? Critical thinking is the essence of these disciplines. Indeed, they are skilled at defining problems as well as in formulating solutions. Yet how often are they called upon to apply that skill in the difficulties facing the institution?

The simple fact is that there are a wide variety of skills that academic faculty members possess which would be beneficial to the organization as a whole; these are but a few obvious examples. Often, however, the involvement of academicians is sought only in areas which directly affect them as individuals or their disciplines.

Foundational Skills

One initial objection to the inclusion of academic faculty members might be from those who wonder if this suggests that academicians are the only faculty members (or administrators, for that matter) possessing these skills. (The obvious answer to this question: "No.") Further, when a college is dealing with issues related to technical programs in particular, it might seem like mere patronage to involve academic faculty members in seeking a resolution to the issue. The fact is that the academicians possess basic skills that are needed, but they would find themselves dealing with technical matters which are outside of their field of expertise. This is a cogent point. Obviously there will be other individuals within the institution who possess the skills in question.

Also, no faculty members, academic or technical, should be called upon to serve in an area in which they are bound to fail[5]. Yet this concern, while valid, misses the point. The goal is to provide opportunities for engaging all faculty members in the life of the college.

The question becomes whether the issues being considered in any given situation are truly technical in nature. Is it imperative that technical faculty members be involved to the exclusion of the academicians, or might a mixture provide benefit? The goal should be to include all faculty members in the overall life of the institution to the greatest extent possible. Undervaluing the basic skills which the academic faculty members offer is one of the ways in which this goal fails to be achieved.

"Academicians tend to focus on theory; that is the nature of their disciplines."

Theory Versus Practice

A second objection follows closely. Some would argue that there is a fundamental difference between the academic and technical fields: theory versus practice. Academicians tend to focus on theory; that is the nature of their disciplines. They often lack the experience and knowledge of application which technicians can offer. In the daily life of the institution, what is needed is application rather than theory. Thus, the argument would suggest, the academic faculty members lack truly practical skills.

While there may be some merit to the distinction between theory and practice as it relates to the various disciplines, it would be considerably more difficult to suggest that all of the problem-solving tasks faced by an institution are purely practical in nature. A great deal of theoretical thinking must be applied during planning processes, in the design phase for new programs of study, in issues related to curriculum development, and so forth.

It seems that what may often occur goes something like this: A committee has been tasked with a particular function, the end result of which will be a specific action–something very "applied" in nature. There is some "theory" work to be done at the outset; however, since the ultimate goal is to apply the theory, the committee seeks members who will maintain focus on the end result.

The flaw in this approach is glaringly obvious even at a cursory glance. While the practitioners might be exemplary in their ability to apply theories once developed, asking them to develop those theories places them out of their areas of expertise. In short, the very excuse that is used to exclude the academicians from the implementation phases of the project are precisely the reasons that academicians should be involved in the initial phases. The result is a double-standard that overvalues technical faculty members while simultaneously undervaluing academicians.

Seeing this, a better approach immediately suggests itself: involve the academicians who possess skill sets geared toward theoretical tasks in the initial phases of the project, and replace them with technicians who possess skill sets geared toward application in the latter stages. This does not create additional work; indeed, it might streamline the task by involving the most skilled individuals at each stage of the process. Ultimately, it involves more faculty members in the work of the institution.

"Individual pride is the single greatest hindrance to team effort . . ."

The Deeper Challenge

Why are these approaches and issues often overlooked? As stated earlier, it might be due to stereotyping the faculty members involved in the academic disciplines, or simply failing to identify the special skills which these faculty members possess. It could be that the ideal of involving all the faculty members is forgotten when specific tasks are encountered.

Allow another suggestion, though. It could be a pride issue. Since the skills that academicians often bring to the table are foundational, those overseeing various tasks may think they have no need for assistance in those areas; they may consider it a weakness on their part to request the assistance of a problem-solver or to request input from someone who possesses skill in planning. They fail to realize a key element that is involved: they are not merely seeking assistance from someone who possesses a specific skill, but they are seeking the assistance of someone who is a professional in that skill set, one who earns a living in that foundational, theoretical trade.

This is the deeper challenge that must be addressed. In a phrase, this challenge might be understood as a "turf war." Individual pride is the single greatest hindrance to team effort, and it exists in academia as much as any other arena. English professors, for example, cringe at some of the grammatical errors present in interoffice memoranda, yet they are seldom called upon to proofread important missives before they are dispatched[6]. In this author's experience, most would be flattered if they were invited to assist.

The academic skills are underappreciated. Even when these skills are recognized as necessary, academic faculty members may not be called upon for assistance because those who might extend such invitations feel it would reflect poorly upon themselves. The result is that the academic faculty members, perhaps unintentionally, are excluded from tasks in which they could contribute greatly to the life of the institution and the quality of its product(s).

Academic Resentment

There is one further objection which merits attention. It might be argued that the academic faculty members would resent being included in these functions. On the one hand, it might be perceived as demeaning from the perspective of the academician, that the entire discipline to which they have devoted their lives is boiled down to a handful of foundational skills. On the other hand, it might be argued, academic faculty members have never been required to involve themselves in these ways; it might be perceived as increasing their workload, which would be unwelcomed. Would academic faculty members really embrace such involvement?

"Academicians, like any other faculty members, love their disciplines."

Note, at the outset, that the latter part of this speculation strikes the proverbial nail a direct blow. Academic faculty members have seldom been involved in this manner. That is the issue and the challenge that must be addressed. Thus, those who would voice this concern admit, in their own words, that a disparity exists.

Understand that the technical faculty members are typically involved in these ways. Thus, it is not a question of whether a faculty member should be called on to participate in these areas. Instead, it is a question of equity and distribution among the faculty members, involving all faculty members as extensively as is practical.

Would academicians embrace such inclusion? It is almost certain that they would, when they are really included in the fulfillment of the institution's goals. There are incorrect ways of involving these faculty members, which often does lead to a great deal of resentment. Consider the following example of ill-conceived involvement.

In preparation for an accreditation review by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, one institution[7] sought to involve faculty members on a number of subcommittees, each of which was tasked with the preparation of specific supporting documents related to their internal review. On several of these subcommittees, an academic faculty member was included; notably, these faculty members came from the English, humanities, and philosophy departments (i.e., they were writers). As each subcommittee gathered its data, who was it that was tasked with the actual writing assignment? Naturally, it was the academician-in-residence for that particular committee. The other members would do the bulk of the information-gathering; the academic faculty member would create the resulting document.

There was some resentment created among some of the academic faculty members due to this process. In truth, they were justified, because they were not really included in the work of the committee; instead, they were treated as "ghost writers" by the subcommittees to which they were assigned. While these individuals may have been

the best qualified to perform the writing task, it was no secret that the other committee members viewed the actual writing of the resulting document as "grunt work."

Academicians, like any other faculty members, love their disciplines. Their hope is that others might see the value, at least in part, that academicians find inherent in the study to which they have devoted their lives. When that value is realized, and when that value is desired by others, very few academic instructors would be able to muster the willpower to abstain from involvement. The difficulty is that their "involvement" is often not of that nature at all.

"The final step is for others to allow academicians to get involved."

Thus, the underlying challenge reveals itself once again. Colleges and universities should strive to involve all of the faculty members in the life of the organization to the greatest extent possible. At a technical college, involving the technical faculty members might be more easily accomplished and might seem more natural, but intentional steps should be taken to involve the academic faculty members as well.

In order to do this effectively, care must be taken that the academicians are not simply being used; even the perception of such an intent will lead to resistance and resentment, and rightfully so. Those trained in the academic disciplines should be involved in the areas where they are most likely to succeed and provide benefit to the institution, just as technical faculty members are called upon to participate in issues related to their respective fields of expertise.

This means stepping back and reconsidering the special skill sets involved in the academic disciplines. Many of those skills are foundational, skills that technicians possess as well. Many of the academic skills are theoretical, skills that technicians have learned to apply in situations they regularly encounter. Yet the academicians must be recognized and treated as professionals in their respective areas. The academic skills do possess great value, and the challenge is for institutions to revisit this simple fact.

The final step is for others to allow academicians to get involved. Allowing a mathematician to engage in problem-solving does not mean that others lack the skill. Allowing a psychologist to assist in designing a research project does not mean that the task was dependent upon her input. Yet the sole reason that this is often overlooked is because others within the institution do not believe that they need what the academicians can offer; they feel that they have progressed beyond those foundations. And it is in this very point that they often deceive themselves.

Conclusion

Kellogg's Frosted Flakes® ran a series of television advertisements in years past with an interesting tag line: "Taste it again for the first time." This slogan might be seen

as a restatement of the old adage, "Familiarity breeds contempt." In whatever way it is stated, the basic point remains constant: it is easy to overlook things that seem to be so commonplace that they do not require careful thought. This seems to be the plight of the academic disciplines at many colleges today; it seems particularly so at technical institutions, where the nature of the college itself tends to downplay those skills.

Institutions will find it detrimental to ignore constituent assets while seeking to successfully fulfill a mission. The educational marketplace is evolving, and any overlooked resource represents a missed opportunity. To this end, institutions of higher education need to intentionally involve those faculty members who are not engaged in the overall life of the college. In many cases, this need exists in particular in the college's utilization of its academic faculty members. This discussion has sought to highlight the specific issues which must be addressed in order for this to be accomplished effectively.

Notes

1. A distinction is being made throughout this paper between the "academic" and "technical" disciplines. The academic disciplines would include all of the traditional general education curricula, including English, mathematics, the natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, etc.), the social sciences (psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, political science, philosophy, etc.), and the fine arts. These will be collectively referred to as the "academic" disciplines throughout the remainder of this discussion.

The "technical" disciplines are those that are more applied in nature. Included within this category would be such areas as engineering, computer science, business (including such specializations as restaurant and hotel management, culinary arts, catering, etc.), architecture (and drafting), health care-related fields, and vocational trades (automotive repair, diesel mechanics, welding, etc.). All such disciplines will be collectively referred to as "technical" disciplines throughout the remainder of this discussion.

2. This leads to an additional question, which is quite beyond the scope of this discussion: Could it be that this need for additional skilled workers contributes to the outsourcing of skilled positions to workers in other underdeveloped countries? Perhaps this is a contributing factor, where institutions of higher education are not supplying the marketplace with a large enough number of skilled workers to keep all of those positions in America.

3. The Millennial Generation is roughly defined as those individuals born in the 1980s and 1990s; exact dates are in dispute (the generation may begin as early as 1977 or as late as 1985, while the ending date may be as early as 1994 or as late as 2002). There are other names by which this generation is known, including Generation Y, Generation Why?, and the Echo Boom Generation (*Generation Y*, n.d.). In the context of the present discussion, the importance of recognizing this generation is that the traditional students entering colleges and universities are members of the Millennial Generation. This is

even true if the starting date for this generational demographic is as late as 1985; the 18-year-old of today was born in 1987.

4. While this is no more true in today's climate than in the past, the reality of this adage is becoming more apparent because of the nature of the challenges currently presenting themselves.

5. Indeed, it would be a stretch to categorize such a practice as "involvement"; rather, it would be sabotage. Any faculty member, academic or technical, would be properly offended to be placed in such a position, for the outcome is certain to be professionally demeaning.

6. There must be a word of caution here; I will more fully address this issue later in the discussion. However, the suggestion is not that academicians should be relegated to or treated as clerical assistants. The point of the example is that what stands in the way of this sort of utilization of skills is a pride issue in the part of the person preparing the piece for publication.

7. This actually occurred at an institution known to this author. The purpose for sharing this example is not, however, to place blame; it is intended to be illustrative. For this reason, the identity of the institution is not revealed.

References

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