

Minutes*

Faculty Consultative Committee
Thursday, October 29, 1998
1:30 – 3:30
Room 710 Social Sciences

- Present: Sara Evans (chair), Linda Brady, Gary Davis, Stephen Gudeman, David Hamilton, Marvin Marshak, Judith Martin, Fred Morrison, Matthew Tirrell
- Absent: Kent Bales, Mary Dempsey, Marilyn Grave, M. Janice Hogan, Roberta Humphreys, Michael Korth, Leonard Kuhi, V. Rama Murthy
- Guests: Executive Vice President Robert Bruininks; Associate Vice President Victor Bloomfield
- Other: Rich Broderick (University Relations)

NOTE: This was a meeting devoted entirely to a discussion of the intellectual future of the University. For this meeting, FCC focussed on the issue of research, beginning with comments from the different individual vantage points on the changing nature of research and its impact on our departments. The following summary notes key points made along the way. There will be two more such discussions in the course of the year.

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Interdisciplinary work is large and growing; so are inter-institutional projects; no one person can be good in all the fields of knowledge required for such projects. All faculty are doing interdisciplinary work. There are few large center grants that are NOT inter-institutional.

Interdisciplinary is not the same as multi-disciplinary: the former, more difficult, is interdigitation of researchers working together, elbow-to-elbow rather than dividing up the work among several people. The difference is seeking help for one's problem (multi-disciplinary) rather than collaboration on the initial conception, doing something none would have done independently, and perhaps thinking in a different way (interdisciplinary).

Inter-institutional work means much of the activity may be centered elsewhere; attempts by the University to retain control of it (such as through the Conflict of Interest policy) may be fruitless or counterproductive.

Intra-institutional projects also increasingly cross boundaries, and may reach outside to the private sector. Relationships with the outside can raise questions about what is driving the research. In some fields, shifting boundaries occur in the researcher's head, or only very slightly; in others, there are shifting disciplinary boundaries all can see. In some fields, the single-author work remains the norm; in others, it is not.

* These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate or Twin Cities Campus Assembly; none of the comments, conclusions, or actions reported in these minutes represent the views of, nor are they binding on, the Senate or Assembly, the Administration, or the Board of Regents.

The University's academic culture, and the tenure code, are based on individual performance, and do not provide adequate ways of recognizing participation in a team or a group.

What is the role of the discipline? A grounding in a field; a source of methodology; a source of professional identity; a way to organize office space. In some cases, they may span the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities; in some cases, fields of study are ENTIRELY interdisciplinary. Faculty do interdisciplinary work but teach the discipline to undergraduates.

What of the department? Why do they go on forever, but interdisciplinary projects have a sunset? They can create resistance to interdisciplinary work; to dissolve them would leave graduate students free-floating and without grounding in a field; they can reify fields or ways of thinking; they receive (institutional) funding while other activities may not. IMG is discipline-focused, but a call to rebuild strong departments is not intellectually focussed or performance driven. At the same time, given an extraordinary number of combinations possible among various disciplines and sub-disciplines (5000 pairs, 166,000 triplets), only a few can be organized; the institution is paralyzed by choice, so makes decisions on non-rational bases. That may be inevitable. This also means the department may be the most reasonable way to allocate funds on a continuous basis; the questions are how to make them more fluid and how to encourage more cross-disciplinary work in the reward system.

It is easier to obtain assistance or do collaborative research when time is accounted for, when there is a well-defined mechanism to account for transfer of expertise; in the University, such collaboration or assistance is parasitic, and help is not given because ICR funds do not result from the assistance lent. IMG is a threat to the pipelines, not the product. Collaborative efforts need to be supported through or around units, and productive activities in teaching and research should receive financial support, not a department on the grounds that its base budget should be increased. Perhaps disciplines are irrelevant except as a funding mechanism; maybe other mechanisms should be explored.

A number of the best departments were built by a single individual pursuing a vision; that is the opposite of a discipline reaching out. Can department-building efforts be revived? Sometimes; or the faculty with a shared vision can drive creation of a good department. The difficulty is sustaining a culture of excellence; it is difficult to develop, requires nurturing, and is easy to lose.

Departments can create boxes into which people are hired (e.g., they must have a Ph.D. in X to be considered), rather than hiring the best people who can be found who might bring something new to the field. The pressure in hiring is to replace the last person who left. In some fields, the best people are those who bring additional but different training (e.g., sociologists or economists in law).

What are the barriers to interdisciplinary research? All faculty are doing it, and the barriers may not be there.

One hears over and over that faculty would like to have lunch with their colleagues from other fields (but that everyone is too busy). Perhaps a condition of leaves (on campus) is that faculty attend such lunches with colleagues. Also possible would be colloquia (over lunch) focused on particular topics; people would show up if provided lunch, or even liquids. The biggest enemy of such a proposal is the need to schedule classes all across the day. The Graduate School could organize these sessions.

Thought tends to run incrementally in interdisciplinary research: do the grant, rather than change the culture. People change the culture, and the faculty are changing the University, but there is no culture change unless time and money are invested and expectations are created. Deep in the culture at Minnesota is the urge to bulldoze the prairie to level the anthills.

What would get a unit into the top ten (e.g., in Law)? (1) The number of faculty, so there is the critical mass needed to develop expertise in several areas, rather than only a few (those ranked #6 - #15 are much bigger, and can have stellar groups of faculty in multiple areas).

(2) Geography (snow) – geography matters, as does accessibility. There are things the University could do to offset this disadvantage, but that it is stingy about (more travel funding, which would encourage faculty vitality and enhance the visibility of the University).

Why are so many Nobel laureates former – rather than current -- Minnesota faculty? Because of compensation, support, and accessibility. Size and salary are the two most important determinants of NRC ranking. Culture also matters; how does one create units where people want to work, who are provided decent salaries, whose work is recognized and valued, where expectations are high, where support is provided? The way to build a department is to grow faculty, keep them for 30 years, and provide ways to keep them vital.

In many fields the University is better than its reputation because leading figures in the field have never been here and don't know just how good it is. Endowed lectureships could be used to bring in experts, who might be pleasantly surprised. Such lectures could also be used to galvanize interdisciplinary discussions. There could also be conferences; the University has the advantage of hotels within walking distance.

The important foci are leadership, support, and culture, not interdisciplinary research per se; there must be creativity and innovation in fields with staying power. What is important is not to suppress interdisciplinary research or to create institutional barriers to creativity and productivity.

We can look at our very best departments and ask how they achieved their pre-eminence. One example discussed was a department which set out to lead its field by hiring people trained in adjacent disciplines whose expertise would allow the field to change. This vision put the department out ahead of the field, and was so effective that it has effectively changed the discipline, not just here, but across the country. To integrate aspirations with the Graduate School review process, care must be taken to recognize leadership, rather than step on it, AND to be perceptive about what is NOT leadership.

The idea of mentorship is intriguing, parallel to the training of artisans. The University does not train people how to be leaders of departments or how to be a member of the academic or University community, and to make them want to stay. There are disincentives for doing so. A more generous leave policy could “up the ante” on civic expectations. Development and mentoring of the next generation of leaders is a problem; it is hard to find chairs, deans, and chairs of major committees. There must be ways for people to keep their careers on track AND become engaged in the University, rather than having to put their careers on hold to do so. There must be ways to assist faculty in participating in the University (e.g., provide an RA when a faculty member takes on major responsibilities).

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How does the University avoid further slippage in the NRC rankings? more money for compensation, more public relations, and evaluation of how money is invested. IMG is NOT a long-term investment strategy.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota