The professorate is filled with ironies; surely one of the most puzzling is why a community of people who are all committed to a life of engagement with learning could be so unengaged with each other, or with the department to which they belong. How can this be? Why is it that people treat the term “departmental collaboration” as an oxymoron? Why is it that, even though I wrote The Collaborative Department (Wergin, 1994) nearly 10 years ago, I continue to be kidded by colleagues who say that it was the only book of pure fantasy ever published by the American Association for Higher Education? How did we get this way?

The most straightforward reason is that faculty members are by nature an introverted lot. The freedom and flexibility we enjoy attracts those who are “already disposed to be insistent individualists” (Bennett, 1998, p. 19). These dispositions are reinforced by a graduate school culture which prizes individual accomplishment and a faculty reward system which promotes what Gene Rice (1986) has called a culture of competitive advantage.

The consequences are clear and unequivocal. Research on faculty values undertaken in the last decade reveals that most college faculty see themselves as academic entrepreneurs working from their own private agendas. “So what?” you may ask. “All this talk about ‘engagement’ is just the latest in a long and lamentable string of half-baked management schemes to reduce faculty power and autonomy. We need to just hire the best faculty we can and turn them loose.” A response to this argument, an argument not without merit, has six points:

- The work faculty do is contextual to the institution, whether they like it or not.
- The same is true of departments. The work of a psychology department in College A is different from the work of another psychology department in College B, even if it has a similar size and mission.
- Faculty entrepreneurship in the absence of collective responsibility threatens curricular coherence.
- The desire for connection with an intellectual community is one of the most powerful faculty motivators and it never goes away.
• Faculty autonomy must not be confused with privatization. Autonomy is fundamental to academic freedom and cannot be abridged. Faculty members earn their professional autonomy by engaging in work that benefits society. In a culture of privatization, however, faculty feel responsible only to themselves and what benefits their careers.

• Finally, if none of the above reasons are persuasive enough, there’s this: As long as faculty members are individual agents, responsible only to themselves, they will have little power as a group.

The challenge, therefore, is how to engage the department in ways that preserve faculty autonomy while also helping the department evolve a sense of collective responsibility. Such departments have the following characteristics in common.

**An atmosphere of critical inquiry.** This quality underlies all others. Critical reflection is much more likely, and much more likely to be powerful, when individuals understand others’ perspectives and how others experience the same reality differently. A departmental leader creates such a climate by modeling critically reflective behavior personally and by creating settings where such reflection is comfortable. Stephen Brookfield (1995) suggests that the department make time for “critical conversation groups” in the faculty work week: “[E]very two to three weeks, [devote] part of the college day to a troubleshooting session in which [faculty] come together to talk about dilemmas and critical moments in their practice” (p. 253).

To those who say they don’t have time, or ask what they will be expected to do less of by engaging in more critical reflection as a department, my response would be, first, that reflection should be at the center of faculty work and not an add-on, and second, that careful deliberation as an academic community should make the collective job not only of higher quality but also more efficient.

**A shared understanding of faculty work.** In an increasingly privatized academic culture, faculty need all the more to feel connected to an intellectual community. Connection requires that faculty members have a shared knowledge of the work they do. Accomplishing this requires the following:

• First, the department begins with the premise that faculty work (teaching and service as well as scholarship) is community property (Shulman, 1993). This means that faculty have no proprietary rights to courses or programs, and that individual faculty workplans, including goals, expectations, and evaluation criteria, are public to departmental faculty.
• Second, the department acknowledges that college faculty today are being asked to do more than ever before. The burden is greatest on junior faculty, who often find themselves feeling as if they have to do it all. The message to the department should be this: The days of the “Lone Ranger of the Intellect” (Langenburg, 1992) are long gone, if in fact they ever existed.

• Third, faculty develop a forum for sharing their work in a way that builds trust and provides assurances that no individual sweetheart deals have been struck with the chair (there are several ways to do this, all described in McMillin & Berberet, 2002). I’ve been struck by how “going public” with individual faculty work creates both an atmosphere of trust and a heightened sense of individual accountability.

A shared sense of mission and collective responsibility. An understanding of collective faculty work must start with the individual and work outward, not the other way around. Departmental discussions about “our mission” are virtually guaranteed to make faculty eyes roll to the back of the head—and why shouldn’t they? This is just the sort of activity that drives faculty crazy: Not only does it lack intellectual stimulation, it’s also widely perceived—usually accurately—as an empty exercise that will have little utility beyond satisfying some administrative mandate or other. Besides, faculty members are so good at deconstructing text that language will be sliced and diced to the point where the mission statement really doesn’t communicate anything unique about the department.

There’s a better way, and that’s to work from the inside out. A shared sense of mission must begin with an inventory of the work faculty do, and then an examination of what this work adds up to and how the collective whole adds value to the institution. The department needs to ask some fundamental questions of itself: How are we more than just an aggregate of individual faculty activity? What is it about our collective strengths, interests, and experience that makes our group unique, different from similar departments in other universities? How might we best contribute to the good of our students, our institution, and our discipline?

Differentiated faculty work. Chairs hardly need to be reminded that academic departments have diffuse purposes and usually do not have clear tasks that all members share. Thus, any attempt to turn academic departments into teams is likely to be a losing proposition. Instead, the departmental mission
which evolves inductively from individual inventory and collective reflection is an anchor, a touchstone, a point of connection for all department members. It’s the point at which faculty members can identify how they might have the greatest impact, and conversely, which activities they might de-emphasize.

The key to the success of differentiated work lies in individualized faculty workplans. Workplans have two purposes: They provide a framework for individual faculty activity within the context of departmental mission and goals and collectively they represent the mosaic of the department’s work as a whole, and for what it proposes to be individually and mutually accountable. A balance needs to be struck between defining boundaries and maintaining flexibility, and their use cannot be allowed to devolve into just another administrative chore, because to do so would defeat their whole purpose. They need to be living documents, always available for renegotiation as circumstances and opportunities dictate. Vibrancy cannot be maintained unless people are encouraged to grow and try new things.

**A shared understanding of how the department adds value to the institution.** Departments add value—that is, contribute to the good of the institution—in vastly different ways. Criteria that make sense for a biology department with a significant research agenda and substantial service courses will make no sense at all for a music department with small enrollments and zero grant support. Thus, the worst strategy for a department is to be passive about evaluation and to accept whatever criteria are proposed externally. My experience in working with departments, deans, and central administration on these matters suggests a widespread acknowledgment of the strength of departmental diversity and a willingness to negotiate criteria for evaluating the work of the department. The key is whether the department is proactive about this, and is willing to step forward and say, “This is how we add value to the institution …” and “This is the sort of evidence which will show it.”

Can a department not be engaged, in the ways described above, and still be a “department of quality”? Yes, it’s possible, but consider what the department would have to look like: It would consist entirely of world-class scholars who are given free rein to go wherever their intellectual muses and their grant dollars can take them; their students would consist entirely of those who have come to study “with Professor so-and-so,” and do so; and all this must be completely acceptable to the larger institution, which expects nothing more from these faculty. Does this set of circumstances describe your own department? I didn’t think so.

*This article is adapted from a chapter in Jon Wergin’s forthcoming book, Departments That Work (Anker, 2003).*
REFERENCES


*Jon F. Wergin is AAHE Visiting Scholar and Professor of Educational Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University. E-mail: jwergin@mail1.vcu.edu.*