Faculty Values

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2001/iss3/5

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Chris Schilling, associate professor of materials science and engineering, had always noticed lack of interaction between faculty members of different departments. “I get in my car every morning, park in the parking lot, walk in my office, and do my thing. I never meet professor so-and-so in history. He’s in a building way across campus. And it turns out professor so-and-so in history has a lot of the same concerns I do. ‘How do I get my computer upgraded? How do I upgrade my teaching lab?’ Just a number of things that faculty run into in their day-to-day work,” Schilling says. It was with this problem in mind that Schilling created the Faculty Values e-mail list about two years ago. The e-mail discussion group is intended to help professors in different departments share opinions and offer advice, as well as provide a forum for venting the occasional rant. “It’s a natural consequence of how the university is set up. We don’t know each other; we don’t have a chance to talk to each other,” Schilling says. “We’re so busy these days that we just don’t have time to talk with buddies across the hall.” On any given day you can find an incredibly wide range of topics discussed on Faculty Values, and often times the opinions expressed are wickedly critical of the university and its administration. Last spring, when some members of the ISU faculty circulated a petition blaming former President Martin Jischke with creating an “atmosphere of fear and repression,” Faculty Values was alive with professors shooting opinions back and forth. The same thing happened this semester when ISU selected its new president, Gregory Geoffrey. Though Faculty Values was originally intended simply to make the exchange of information between departments easier, it has grown to be more of a discussion forum for faculty and administrative policies and the state of the university as a whole. Schilling says Faculty Values has about 100 members although only five or six participate regularly. Subscribers to the list are mostly faculty, with a few administrators and a handful of students. Carl Mize, associate professor of forestry and a frequent participant on Faculty Values, says he considers the list important for the university. Mize was one of the professors who co-authored the anti-Jischke petition.
“Basically, we love this school and we don’t like to see some of the stuff that’s going on here. We want more accountability and we don’t want to be punished for saying so.”
"It allows faculty who don't necessarily support the university's positions to freely and openly communicate," Mize says. "Being concerned about something and unable to communicate with people of like mind is frustrating. Faculty Values allows discussion and brain storming about how to approach problems."

Virginia Allen, associate professor in English, says Faculty Values "has a rhetorical power never imagined by our founding fathers. It allows us to talk about the details of a debate. In fact, it encourages us to do so, and it allows us the time and space to target logical fallacies and misrepresentations of positions...without the burden of having to produce a finished essay 'suitable for publication in order to do so.' That aspect of the material on Faculty Values is the very one that worries interim President Richard Seagrave.

"Good discourse and good discussion of issues relies on interaction between the people who want to have the conversation. E-mail is really good for scheduling meetings and exchanging data, but in my view because it's a long time span between when you send the message and the other person sends back a reply, maybe a day or two for busy people, it's just not a good medium," says Seagrave, adding that he has been known to spend an entire day composing one e-mail to make certain that it is clear and concise.

Seagrave says an e-mail list like Faculty Values might make it easier to distort the meaning someone is trying to express.

"Sometimes we get really intellectually ticked when we see something taken out of context and twisted around and recirculated. But it doesn't happen very often, and it's not unique to the e-mail phenomenon," he says.

Distortions are far less likely to occur in a face-to-face encounter where questions or concerns can be addressed immediately and without an intermediary, Seagrave says. As an example, he points out that Provost Rollin Richmond can more effectively communicate details about an academic plan at a Faculty Senate meeting than by sending out a mass e-mail. Of course, not everyone agrees.

"I think some administrators have downplayed [Faculty Values'] importance, suggesting that those who participate are not typical, nor do they voice the common concerns of most faculty," says William Kunerth, professor emeritus of journalism. Kunerth also co-authored the anti-Jischke petition.

Kunerth may be right, but he can't ignore facts. One-hundred people on a campus serving more than 25,000 students is a pretty small group. Also, it would be difficult to argue that five or six people can accurately represent the opinions and thoughts of thousands of their peers.

The small amount of participation did have Schilling worried when he began the list; he thought it wasn't working. But then he started to hear from people who were listening and reading although they weren't contributing.

"The majority is what we call lurkers, or listeners, for whatever reason. I don't know what everybody's reason is; there are a number of people who have told me they are concerned about reprisals. I'm not sure that's the story with everybody, but that's what they are telling me," Schilling says.

Schilling himself has never been worried about criticizing the administration, though. "Being a tenured associate professor, there's not a great deal they can do other than denying me promotion to full professor."

Schilling says the story is different with other university employees besides faculty.

"With professional and scientific staff, they've told me reprisals are a very serious concern for them. And they have the same concerns — shrinking state budget, where's the money going, are we spending it efficiently, why is Reiman Gardens charging money, why is all the building expansion going on when we can't put chalk in the classrooms. Those are the kinds of things that they get in a lot of trouble for talking about," he says.

Seagrave disagrees with Schilling and the lurkers, insisting the administration would never try to "get back" at those who choose to rock the boat.

"There are no steps to take. This is not the army ... We can't say drop and give me 25. It isn't even athletics. Can you imagine if we're trying to recruit great faculty members to come to this institution and students and resources, and can you imagine how much damage we'd do to ourselves forever if we tried to do that?"

"The idea that we would do anything to infringe on anybody's right to express their view or seek reprisals because it was an unpopular view, it's just not there. We wouldn't do anything intentionally as part of a strategy to make something like that happen. It's a poison pill is what it is," he says.

Richmond wholeheartedly agrees with Seagrave. "I'm delighted to be a part of an institution where people can speak their minds, even if they say the provost is wacky," he says.

"Most of the things that affect faculty members' lives, especially non-tenured [faculty] in an institute like this, most of those decisions are made and implemented in the department by their policies. It would be very difficult for either dean, provost, or president to directly influence their lives in an arbitrary way without exposing themselves to scrutiny," Richmond says.

Richmond even went so far as to offer a deal to any faculty member. "If any faculty member is concerned that his or her comments will damage them, they can get a written letter from me that anything they say there will not affect them on promotional or tenure review. If there is significant concern, I'd be happy to work with them to allay their fears," he says.

Whether speaking out can get a university employee in hot water or not, the Faculty Values list is not merely a psychological release for frustrated colleagues. Postings on the list have actually brought about some changes at ISU.

"I think one of the most positive things that has happened is the discussion that we've had on the faculty-conduct policy," Schilling says. The Faculty Senate has had a faculty conduct policy in the works for four years, and it has suffered a number of delays. The policy was put on the Web last semester, but Schilling says it was difficult to get everybody to actually read it.

"It was mailed out to everybody, but it's a 50-page document and everybody is so busy, we don't read it. But what happened was people who were on Faculty Values read it, and said, hey, do you see the problem on page four, paragraph three and does it really say this."

They eventually had a list of around 25 issues that they thought needed discussion and fixing. When the Faculty Senate had a special meeting on the conduct policy, several people who had commented on the policy on Faculty Values attended. The senate still has a long list of suggested revisions pending.

Richmond suspects the participants in Faculty Values had a lot to do with the current state of the conduct policy. "I'm sure they have had a substantial influence. It's almost always good to have a variety of people work on a policy document. You get a variety of views on it."

And as long as Schilling keeps Faculty Values up and running, Richmond can probably expect a variety of views on many things. Schilling says there are a lot more changes that need to happen at ISU, and he wants to stay on campus to see if he can catalyze that change.

"Sure, I could run away to another job and let this situation continue to wither at ISU. Or, I can continue to play an active role in the Faculty Senate and on Faculty Values, which are both, in principle, focused on solving the same problem: producing a better school for the people of Iowa.

"Basically, we love this school, and we don't like to see some of the stuff that's going on here. We want more accountability, and we don't want to be punished for saying so."

If anyone would like to subscribe to the Faculty Values e-mail list, simply send an e-mail to majordomo@iastate.edu with "subscribe faculty values" in the body of the message.

Nathan Englerth is a sophomore in journalism. This is his first article for Ethos. He also has had articles published in the Iowa State Daily.