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A Culture of Openness

By GARY A. OLSON

A fellow dean at a private university in the Northwest once told me that she routinely conceals each departmental budget from the other units in her college because she fears that revealing the numbers would lead to widespread discontent.

"If the philosophy faculty had any idea what the salaries and operating budgets actually are in biological sciences," she said, "there would be class warfare."

A provost I know at another private university claims to keep tightly under wraps the procedures he uses to determine annual faculty merit raises.

"I, of course, solicit input from the departmental committees and college deans," he said, "but I then employ a rather elaborate formula for calculating the actual performance increases. We don't release the formula because it would only cause needless quibbling over the details of the formula and thereby draw attention away from the real point: that good teaching and research will be rewarded."

Certainly, those actions are not improper or wrong per se. They are intended, I believe, to preserve harmony and avoid bad feeling. Nevertheless, such secrecy is ultimately corrosive and is likely to produce the very discontent and bitterness that those well-intentioned administrators are attempting to sidestep.

In fact, I would argue that academic administrators have a responsibility to conduct university business in as transparent and open a manner as possible, that we have an obligation not just to avoid secrecy but to actively promote a climate of openness.

The dean who conceals her departmental budgets is attempting to manage her college's affairs within the context of an inescapable academic reality: Structural inequalities are pervasive and, in effect, are a central characteristic of higher education.

But inequality does not always equate to injustice. It would be a mistake to conclude that because programs, units, or faculties don't always receive "equal" resources, some injustice necessarily exists. Different programs, units, and faculties are more or less costly for a variety of context-specific reasons.

I'm an English professor, and it would not cost much in start-up funds to get me up and running at a new college: Give me a decent computer and perhaps some money to purchase books or to travel to libraries, and I'm content. Hire a senior chemist, however, and you might need to invest

\$250,000 or more to equip a lab.

Although I would certainly welcome an extra quarter of a million dollars, that amount would be extraordinarily excessive for the type of research I do.

And not all chemists would need the same amount of start-up money; the amount would be dictated by the nature of their research. Multiply such disparities across colleges, and they become even more pronounced. The start-up money for a new faculty member in a college of engineering or a medical school may seem astronomical when compared to that required by our senior chemist.

And start-up money is only one of countless other differences. A sociology department with a doctoral program requires substantially greater resources than a department without one; a school of communication that operates a public television and/or radio station has considerable resource needs thanks to those stations; and a medical school's needs are multiplied when it operates an eye clinic, or a pediatric clinic, or a cancer institute -- or all three.

My point is that such differences are a structural fact of campus life and that it is futile to conceal them or pretend they don't exist. A better alternative is to make those facts known far and wide -- and that includes making budgets available for all to see -- so that everyone understands how the university works.

The truth is that a culture of secrecy breeds mistrust and paranoia; openness and transparency lay the groundwork for understanding. As a seasoned vice president for finance once told me, "People always imagine much greater inequities than really exist. When they see the actual figures, they learn that their fears were greatly exaggerated or completely unfounded."

That is precisely what my provost friend fails to see. Concealing the formula he uses to calculate merit-based raises is most likely to cause some faculty members to imagine, ipso facto, that they were done some injustice in the process -- that the colleague in the office next door fared better than should have been the case.

I would even go so far as to say that salaries themselves -- of administrators as well as faculty members -- should be available for all to see, as is the practice in many public institutions. Transparency in such matters, and the accountability that attaches to it, is always and only a virtue, never something to be feared.

Of course, certain aspects of academic administration must necessarily remain confidential. Administrators are obligated, for example, to protect privacy in personnel matters like disciplinary actions. It would be inappropriate for a department head, say, to divulge details of a dispute to individuals not directly involved in the case. Or for a dean to discuss confidential personnel issues involving a department head with individuals unrelated to the department or the case.

The details of personnel cases should be revealed only on a need-to-know basis so as to protect those involved. Discretion in those kinds of scenarios serves a positive purpose: protecting reputations. Secrecy in most other venues of academic governance, however, rarely serves a

positive purpose.

Having said all that, I don't want to seem to suggest that injustices don't exist. Clearly they do. In a given context, a program may receive a disproportionate amount of resources, or one group or individuals may benefit unduly as a result of favoritism. But such specific injustices are different in kind from the network of structural differences I've been discussing -- the fact that some individuals, programs, or units are costlier than others as a consequence of market forces and a host of other material considerations.

In fact, fostering a climate of openness and transparency is the first step to correcting the kinds of injustices that do exist. It is much easier to distinguish between genuine injustices and structural differences (and then to take measures to rectify the former) once academic budgets and other important documents and decision-making procedures are out in the sunshine for all to examine.

What's more, promoting such a climate of openness will help dissipate the us-versus-them attitude that too often plagues academe.

So my response to my fellow dean is: "You need not worry about class warfare if you do two things: Provide clearly articulated explanations of how and why structural differences exist, and make your budgets and other key documents and procedures available to all. Better to empower people with knowledge than cripple them with fear."

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