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MAKING GVSU WORK

Diana Pace, Bart Merkle, and Kathleen Blumreich

Collaboration is most simply defined as “working together.” Of course, University faculty and staff literally work together, sharing a common employer and conducting business in the same general locale; but members of the University community also work together on committees, on departmental projects, on office-wide and/or campus-wide issues. Most often, however, this type of teamwork occurs among colleagues within the same academic area. We would like to broaden the definition of collaboration and encourage faculty and staff to embrace a more comprehensive view of what it means to “work” at GVSU. In our view, there are three possible avenues for collaboration: forced collaboration, arising out of necessity or crisis; initiated collaboration, arising out of known and shared interests; and serendipitous collaboration, arising out of a casual meeting or contact.

In forced collaboration, despite even unpleasant circumstances, the individuals involved can benefit greatly from understanding the value of working together. This past summer, the President went to the Counseling Center to tell the staff that there had been a suicide on campus. He and a staff member walked to the Little Mac Bridge, where one of the visiting Japanese students had taken his life within the last hour. At that point, a number of Grand Valley employees began to work together in a remarkable way to deal with this tragedy: David Ihrman from the English Department; Al Wygant from Campus Security; Al Walczak from International Studies; Bart Merkle, Associate Provost and Dean of Students; Steven Ward, Director of Public Relations; Marie Noe, Secretary to Vice President McLogan and volunteer crisis worker; and several staff members from the Counseling Center. Their concern was for the other Japanese students and the family of the student who had committed suicide. Combining all of the levels of their various professional expertise was necessary to provide an array of services: language translation, physical safety, notification of relatives, contact with the media, crisis management, and grief counseling. Those involved were surprised by the way in which they were able to provide such a smooth flow of these services. Their efforts were comprehensive, professional, and well-meshed, even though none of them had ever worked with each other in a situation of such complexity. Those who had been involved in this tragedy came away with a sense of the absolute necessity for collaboration in handling a crisis. No single individual could have provided—or can provide—all of the expertise or all of the solutions, but, together, people from various units were able to attend to the needs of those most affected by this sad event.

Team-teaching is an example of “initiated collaboration.” During her first year at Grand Valley (1976), Diana Pace co-taught a course called “Seeing With the Mind’s Eye” with Ava Arsaga, a faculty member at Thomas Jefferson College. The aim of the course was to teach students how the use of visual images could increase their

ability to problem solve, recall information, and think more creatively. Ava had a background in education and a specialty in teaching skills, and was quite knowledgeable in the applied use of cognitive imagery. On the other hand, Diana knew much more about the research, since she had just completed a dissertation on the topic. Ava would lecture and teach the experiential learning part of the class, and Diana would describe the psychological research on imagery. The students basically got “two for the price of one,” and the two teachers benefited from sharing their knowledge.

“Serendipitous collaboration” may be the most enjoyable kind of collaboration, since it is spontaneous and often originates in social situations among friends. A few years ago, a faculty member from the English Department and two psychologists in the Counseling Center met for a social lunch in the Oak Room. The conversation led to a discussion about personal writing assignments. The English professor shared her concern about giving students writing assignments that required reporting personal experiences and wondered about the ethics of such assignments. The psychologists indicated that they often saw students who reported troubling emotions resulting from what they perceived as the intrusive nature of autobiographical or personal narratives. As the three talked further over lunch, each was struck by new realizations that came from sharing their different perspectives. They decided that day to write an article on the topic. Several months later, the piece was printed (Swartzlander, Pace, Stampler, 1993), and the authors have since received a number of calls and requests from faculty at other colleges and universities to quote the essay or to use it in workshops for faculty.

Another example of a serendipitous collaboration occurred during the winter semester of 1995. Don Williams from Sociology, Thom Jeavons from Public Administration and the Philanthropy Center, Jay Cooper from Student Life, and Bart Merkle from the Dean of Students Office were chatting about the concept of “service learning” over a cup of coffee at Afterwards. The conversation proceeded from service learning as a pedagogical issue to the much broader question, “What is good teaching and how does one do it?” What became evident from this conversation was that we don’t have a good forum for faculty to talk about their teaching experiences. From this informal coffee house chat emerged the notion of having a conference on teaching. “A Conversation on Teaching,” which over three hundred faculty attended last August, was “hatched” as the result of the collaborative thinking, sharing, and efforts of four individuals from very different academic backgrounds.

Collaboration between staff and faculty is always valuable and can be a source of great satisfaction. By combining ideas from different disciplines, an exciting new perspective can emerge. This new way of looking at an issue or problem often, in turn, generates new theories and practices that contribute to both disciplines. So the question arises: Why don’t we collaborate more often? First, as university faculty and staff, we tend to work in our own little “cubby holes” and relate primarily to colleagues who do what we do: i.e., teach, counsel, conduct research, or administrate. Because both the Allendale and Grand Rapids campuses are growing, most of us who used to know each other, now may not even know some of the members within our own

units. We don't have many opportunities to spend time working with those outside our immediate area of expertise. Second, collaboration doesn't occur "naturally," and working with a colleague from a different discipline typically involves having to set up meetings, which is problematic in itself because schedules often conflict. Moreover, collaboration sometimes means combining two different fields of interest and discipline vocabularies. Finally, by its very nature, collaboration involves a certain "letting go" of the product. One cannot exercise as much control over the outcome when diverse opinions and areas of expertise are brought together.

Barbara Gray (1989) suggests that the impetus for collaboration can be divided into two general categories: resolving conflicts and advancing shared visions. It is this second category that we believe warrants scrutiny, since the orientation and culture of faculty and staff are different. Faculty are the very "heart" of the academic enterprise. They are typically viewed as "authorities" in a discipline, and they tend to be focused on that discipline. Since most institutional promotion and tenure systems reward research and publication activities, it should be no surprise that faculty are likely to make this area of their professional lives a high priority. Consequently, interaction and important relationships are often developed with colleagues external to their home institution, which may, in turn, explain why faculty loyalties sometimes seem more discipline- than institution-oriented. Faculty tend to focus on ideas and theories that they use in their teaching and research. Actually applying these ideas and theories to institutional decision making and actions is not something that they are typically expected (or invited) to do. Hence, faculty gravitate toward the role of problem "identifier" rather than problem "solver."

On the other hand, administrative staff are "supporters" of the academic enterprise, but they are often viewed as "controllers" of the resources, decision making, and institutional actions. They are rewarded for "getting things done," and they tend to function comfortably in teams that identify and implement pragmatic solutions to problems. They are not always comfortable with a great deal of ambiguity, and they sometimes see the faculty propensity to criticize and to analyze as excessive. Staff loyalties tend to center on the institution rather than on their professional area of expertise. However, while some staff members and administrators can see the "big institutional picture," often they are just as narrowly focused on their own area of responsibility as the faculty are on their own discipline.

Clearly, faculty and staff have different orientations and styles of functioning in a campus community. While it is fairly easy to see how conflict or crisis can draw faculty and staff together to collaborate in productive and effective ways, it is also evident why faculty and staff are less likely to collaborate on things that require a shared vision. In our opinion, this latter type of collaboration can occur frequently at an institution only when the following characteristics are present: 1) a clear understanding of what the institutional mission is; 2) a sense of community that encourages respect and honest, ongoing interaction between faculty and staff; and 3) administrative support for and appreciation of collaborative endeavors among colleagues for the betterment of the institution.

As individuals, we need to consider ways in which we can initiate collaboration with our colleagues. As a university community, we need to encourage more “shared vision” collaboration between faculty and staff as a way to solidify GVSU’s commitment to liberal education, encourage interdisciplinary studies and research, improve the campus climate, enhance the international mission, build stronger collegial relationships, and contribute to the surrounding West Michigan community. We believe that Grand Valley can be this type of campus community. What do you think?

Sources

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