

Being A Good Colleague Is Often Easier Said Than Done

Collegiality. It's a loosely used term indicating intellectual relationships and shared authority among individuals engaged in the same profession.

These types of relationships exist throughout the medical and law professions, but — surprisingly enough — are not as common among educational circles as one might think. Teachers, research has indicated, tend to work more independently and isolated from their colleagues than those in other professions.

"It is true that collegiality in the law and medical professions stems from the fact that these individuals have shared the same experiences and have spent more than four years studying their profession," said Barbara Reinken, Ph.D., assistant professor in GVSU's School of Education. "They have established stronger bonds because they've been through years and years of similar experiences. But I didn't want to believe former research which concluded that there was little or no collegiality in the education profession."

Reinken, who describes collegiality as "interactions of teachers on professional matters that occur at work," spent three years researching the subject among teachers in California and Michigan high schools. The focus of her research centered around three basic questions:

- How do teachers perceive collegiality?
- How does the workplace help or hinder collegiality?
- What is the etiquette of collegiality?



Barbara Reinken

Reinken concluded that there was indeed more of a service ideal in the law and medical professions and that maintaining professional standards and keeping abreast of the knowledge base seemed to be a higher priority in those particular fields. For years, teachers' standards were not recognized in the same way.

The study also revealed that collegiality among educators basically remains inside the walls of each individual building, while those in the medical and law professions regularly engage with colleagues in other cities and/or states. Educators work with large groups of people at one time, while lawyers and doctors

usually provide services on an individual basis.

Seniority, Reinken found, had little impact on collegiality in the teaching profession, but knowledge and beliefs — from personal interests, to political viewpoints, to religion — did. She also found that teachers turn to peers of the same gender and ethnic groups. Many school teachers associate primarily with those whose classrooms are closest — not necessarily on a departmental level of common study — and that very few colleagues within the school walls associate outside of school.

"People are looking for people they have some commonality with," Reinken said. "Not everyone is a colleague. There also are co-workers who can be considered peers. A peer is someone you may get along with, but with whom you may not exchange ideas or insights about the profession."

What is it then, that separates collegiality from interpersonal relationships?

"Colleagues find and share interests and support one another in their pursuits," says GVSU President Arend D. Lubbers. "It's always energizing to see it working."

Being a good colleague is about forming relationships based on professional expertise and working together to expand that knowledge base. Unwritten rules of collegial etiquette include — but are not limited to — not



From left to right, John Wissink, Antonio Herrera, Cynthia Mader, Julie Chlebo and Wes Wochholz discuss School of Education issues.

interfering unless asked; not criticizing others for their ideas or beliefs; treating everyone fairly; drawing conclusions only after input from others; being very supportive and being able to inject an element of humor to discussions.

"It's inevitable that we get together on a collegial basis, because of the emphasis and demands we're getting from the business world to be working in teams," says Charles Sturtevant, director of secondary education for Grand Rapids Public Schools and a former teacher and high school principal. "We've got to look at the expertise several people can bring to the table. One person may have a great idea, but several people may have many great ideas."

"When it doesn't exist, it's like you are competing against everyone."

Collegiality, Sturtevant claims, is something that develops over a period of time. The primary elements include trust and relinquishing fears of not always knowing the answers. An openness to risk taking and being receptive to new ideas and innovations helps build the bond of collegiality.

Reinken found that collegial relationships prompt people to think more about their work. They provide emotional and psychological support that reduces tension and reinforces what they are doing.

In higher education, GVSU colleagues sometimes teach together or collaborate to create curricula, write articles or make presentations. Lively discussions and debates help add spice and provide food for thought.

"Anytime you get involved in a good debate, it helps clarify things," says Weston Wochholz, Ph.D., coordinator of secondary student teachers at GVSU. "We can share ideas and points of views. Sometimes, we even change our own ideas."

"A lot of times it depends on who is doing the sharing," Wochholz added. "Some people are better at it than others. Some share well; others not so well."

Interest in one's own subject matter, intellectual curiosity, striving to make and become better teachers and just plain enjoying someone else's expertise and company are all common traits of collegiality, according to Wochholz.

Educators are moving toward the norms of collegiality found in other professions. "Student teachers" are now considered "interns," a term borrowed from the medical profession. Certification and recertification requirements no longer give teachers "licenses" for life, so there is an emphasis on continual learning. There also is a push for a stronger devotion to clients — our students, the workplace and society in general.

"To have collegiality at this level, you have to want to learn," Wochholz said. "As an intellectual, you have to want to learn."

"If you don't want to learn, then you're in the wrong business."