
Summary

The “Navigating Departmental Politics” workshop was held at RIT on December 11, 2014 as part of AdvanceRIT’s Connectivity Series. In this innovative workshop, members of the “Michigan Players” presented a richly layered theatrical sketch to focus on two issues important to any university: faculty hiring and departmental climate. In the theatrical sketch, a department meets to discuss a list of candidates for a faculty position. The two-hour workshop presented how gender, rank, ethnicity, and other aspects of power relations influence the climate and faculty morale. Attendance was excellent, with 130 participants. A trained facilitator led a guided discussion with participants. The goal was to engage participants in critical reflection, respectful dialogue, and problem solving. Over 90% of attendees said they would recommend this session to their colleagues. In a post-workshop debriefing, the Michigan Players shared several insights, strengths, and needs observed during their workshop at RIT. They found that participants at RIT possessed a sophisticated level of understanding of diversity, with a strong ability to recognize and define diversity. Additionally, participants demonstrated a keen awareness of bias with demonstrated understanding and knowledge. The facilitator noted characteristics of the discussions that were unique to RIT, relative to other schools at which the Michigan Players have performed the same sketch. First, in the discussions, RIT participants had a unique focus on the lack of shared vision and values. Second, RIT participants had a strong focus on the need for mentorship and mentorship training. These insights are based on participants’ observations of the interactions between the faculty portrayed in the theatrical sketch and do not necessarily indicate a specific defined need at RIT. A major takeaway is that RIT workshop participants see value in specific training on mentoring, bystander awareness, and strategies to change their own entrenched attitudes.

Event Description

The “Navigating Departmental Politics” workshop was held at RIT on December 11, 2014 as part of AdvanceRIT’s Connectivity Series. In this engaging workshop, members of the “Michigan Players,” a touring theatre company housed in the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan, presented a richly layered theatrical sketch to focus on two issues important to any university: faculty hiring and departmental climate. The two-hour workshop presented how gender, rank, ethnicity, and other aspects of power relations influence the climate and faculty morale. Faculty and those holding academic leadership positions (department heads, deans, etc.) attended separate sessions of this workshop.

Attendance was excellent, with 70 attending the morning session and 60 attending the afternoon session. A trained facilitator led a guided discussion with participants. The goal was to engage participants in critical reflection, respectful dialogue, and problem solving.

In the theatrical sketch, a department meets to discuss a short list of candidates for a faculty position. The sketch presents a range of interactions between individuals. Senior faculty play out long-established tensions, junior faculty try to get their perspectives heard, and the search committee chair struggles to facilitate a productive decision-making process. After watching the sketch, workshop participants were
divided into small groups and asked to identify what challenges and stakes each character faced in effectively navigating departmental politics.

Next, workshop participants watched three short vignettes of “behind the scenes,” one-on-one dialogues between the characters. Two of the short vignettes showed interactions that had occurred before the larger meeting, and one showed interactions after the larger meeting. Then, the facilitator asked workshop participants to identify the strategies the characters used to navigate departmental politics and to suggest other useful strategies. In this way, workshop participants considered what types of practices and interactions may negatively affect the recruitment and hiring of a diverse and excellent faculty. The discussions highlighted areas of strength and need at RIT. At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to fill out a survey to evaluate the workshop and provide suggestions for future Connectivity Series programming.

### Issues and Challenges Identified by RIT Participants in the Theatrical Sketch

After watching the main sketch, RIT workshop participants in small groups were asked to identify what challenges and stakes each character faced in effectively navigating departmental politics. Participants identified a range of issues and challenges, including the following:

- **Lack of Shared Vision/Values:** The department is not unified by shared vision/values. The fractured nature of the department exacerbates differences among faculty of different specialties and “generations.” A history of departmental tension/lack of consensus and a culture of tolerating poor behavior has created a negative climate, in which faculty do not like, respect, or trust one another. Department members do not engage in collaborative dialogue with one another.
- **Lack of Clear Search Criteria:** Department members do not discuss candidates relative to a set of mutually agreed upon search criteria. This lack of a reference point sets the stage for unconscious bias to factor into the assessment of the faculty candidates.
- **Lack of Meeting Structure:** The department chair takes a laissez-faire approach to leadership. This leaves the search chair without the necessary support to effectively carry out his duties and allows strong personalities to dominate the meeting. The meeting suffers from a lack of clearly defined processes for engagement/discussion. Without an organizational structure, not all department members have an equal voice in decision-making.
- **Lack of Effective Leadership:** A leadership vacuum exists within the department. Neither the department chair nor the search chair effectively fulfills his responsibilities.
- **Power Dynamics:** Faculty members from overrepresented groups attempt to continually recreate the department in their own images. An example of power dynamics at work, from the theatrical sketch, was the way in which faculty candidates’ materials were distributed to all of the men before being distributed to any woman at the table. Power in the department is clearly hierarchical; it is related to rank, gender, race/ethnicity, disciplinary specialization, and other dimensions of privilege. This hierarchy affects group and one-on-one interactions.
- **Entrenched Attitudes/Toxic Status Quo:** Faculty enter into departmental discussions with entrenched attitudes and behaviors. These inflexible positions reify a toxic status quo, within which most individuals believe that positive change is impossible. Attempts to change process or perspective are met with resistance. Decisions are made from within a culture of fear.
- **Lack of Effective Mentoring:** It is unclear whether all junior faculty have access to the same mentoring resources. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the mentoring they receive helps them
acclimate to their department or alienates them from it. Even faculty who appear well-meaning in their mentoring attempts seem to lack the skill set to be successful.

- **Lack of Awareness of Behaviors that Contribute to a Negative Departmental Climate:** Department members seem largely unaware of the ways their behaviors contribute to a negative departmental climate. For example, male faculty are unaware of the ways that their gender biases create a difficult environment for their female colleagues. Individuals assume that in the absence of negative intentions in their interactions, there can be no negative effect on others.

- **Lack of Engagement with Faculty as Individuals:** The department has not found a way to engage with faculty members as individuals. It struggles with meaningfully recognizing faculty’s parenting responsibilities and with assisting department members in work-life balance.

- **Failure to View Diversity as a Positive:** Some department members view diversity as a negative. This leads to biases, such as the associate professor of color being talked over/ignored in the meeting within the theatrical sketch.

### Strategies Suggested by RIT Participants to Address Issues and Challenges

After watching a series of short vignettes, the facilitator asked RIT workshop participants to identify the strategies the characters used to navigate departmental politics and to suggest other useful strategies. Participants suggested the following main strategies to address the issues and challenges within the various vignettes:

- **Create a Shared Departmental Vision:** Create a sense of community and shared allegiance between faculty members so that everyone feels like they have a stake in shared department outcomes. Employ a mechanism in the meeting to promote equal voice among faculty members (e.g., have all participants provide a written assessment of the candidates).

- **Set Clear Criteria for the Faculty Search:** Create a document that clearly identifies and ranks criteria for the search. Use this document as a reference in all search discussions/deliberations.

- **Structure Meetings:** Plan meetings so that there is sufficient time for important department discussions and decision-making. Be explicit about who will run what portion of each meeting. Create and share clear agendas for all departmental meetings.

- **Search Chair Should Model Desired Behavior:** The chair should model the kinds of behavior he or she wants to see in faculty. The chair should set norms for professional interpersonal conduct and then reinforce those norms when faculty behavior deviates from agreed upon expectations.

- **Search Chair Should Manage Problematic Interactions between Faculty Members:** The chair should openly address and manage problematic interactions between faculty members.

- **Search Chair Should Advocate for Minority Concerns:** The chair should advocate for minority concerns so that no one is left vulnerable to marginalization or called to act as a spokesperson.

- **Provide Training for the Search Chair:** The chair should be trained to help develop his skills as an academic leader. The chair should seek outside support or professional development.

- **Rethink Department Leadership:** Question how the role of chair is understood within the institution, who is called to serve as a chair, and what to do when a department leader is ineffectual.

- **Provide High-Quality Mentoring:** Think about who mentors and how mentoring occurs. Provide training for mentors. Provide high-quality mentoring for all junior faculty.

- **Define “Diversity” and Value It:** Specify what is meant by “diversity” and value it.
Workshop Reflections from the Michigan Players

In a post-workshop debriefing, the Michigan Players shared several insights, strengths, and needs observed during their workshop at RIT.

- Participants at RIT possessed a sophisticated level of understanding of diversity, with a strong ability to recognize and define diversity.
- Participants demonstrated a keen awareness of bias with demonstrated understanding and knowledge.
- Those who spoke during the workshop struggled in general to identify productive strategies to address the characters’ issues related to departmental politics. For example:
  - Participants identified that the search chair needed training, but never identified what types of training.
  - Participants did not raise any group-directed strategies to address the dysfunction of the department and its lack of shared vision. Suggested strategies were directed only at the chair and not towards the group as a whole. Participants directed their attention towards the chair and his opportunity for growth and improvement, when, in reality, some group-based strategies to address the dysfunction of the department/lack of shared vision may also have been very useful. Faculty members could share more responsibility for creating a shared vision; it is not only the responsibility of the department head.

The group reflected that there seems to be a strong desire to have more tools to address issues at RIT. This supports the value of bringing in outsiders to begin the process of dialogue. The feeling among participants is that it is easier to keep a toxic status quo than to shift it. Given that it is easier to take a negative approach, frustration leads to negative actions and the cycle continues. Participants could consider that even when frustrated, they need to identify positive actions to shift the status quo.

The facilitator noted characteristics of the discussions that were unique to RIT, relative to other schools at which the Michigan Players have performed the same sketch. First, in the discussions, RIT participants had a unique focus on the lack of shared vision and values. Second, RIT participants had a strong focus on the need for mentorship and mentorship training. These insights are based on participants’ observations of the interactions between the faculty portrayed in the theatrical sketch and do not necessarily indicate a specific defined need at RIT. A major takeaway is that RIT workshop participants see value in specific training on mentoring, bystander awareness, and strategies to change their own entrenched attitudes.

Workshop Evaluation Results

At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to evaluate the session by filling out a survey. Fifty-four participants from the morning session completed the survey (response rate: 54/70 = 77.1%), and 32 from the afternoon session completed the survey (response rate: 32/60 = 53.3%).

The survey asked respondents to rate their agreement with a series of statements as “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Neutral,” “Disagree,” “Strongly Disagree,” or “Not Applicable.” Table 1 shows participants’ mean ratings for their level of agreement with key statements (“F” = faculty [morning session] respondents; “A” = administrator [afternoon session] respondents):
As shown in Table 1, faculty and administrators rated this workshop highly. Both groups showed a high level of agreement that the session met their expectations, that the sketch enhanced or altered their understanding of the issues/topics discussed, and that they would recommend the session to their peers. Further, 89% of faculty and 87% of administrators strongly agreed or agreed that the post-sketch discussion enhanced their understanding of the issues presented in the workshop. A somewhat lower percentage (70% of faculty and 65% of administrators) strongly agreed or agreed that they anticipated making changes to their current practices as a result of participating in the workshop.

In a set of open-ended questions, the survey also asked participants to provide additional feedback about the workshop, suggest ways to improve future Connectivity Series offerings, and suggest topics to incorporate into Connectivity Series discussions. Participants offered a great deal of positive feedback. They stated that the use of role-playing vignettes was a safe way to discuss issues and challenges and that it was valuable to talk about certain personalities without naming colleagues. In addition, participants stated that the workshop used good actors, was high in quality, and was well facilitated.

Participants provided valuable feedback for improving future sessions. The most common suggestion was to devote more time to the workshop, including more time to discuss issues, nuances, and strategies within groups. Participants recommended focusing more time on strategies/solutions (instead of problems) and suggested providing participants with a take-home summary of lessons learned. One participant recommended recruiting a more diverse mix of participants for this type of workshop in the future, including more men and more power brokers.
To improve future Connectivity Series offerings, participants suggested making sure that the power brokers (who are often biased) attend. They recommended allowing more time for peer discussions and focusing on the outcomes that will be achieved. In addition, they recommended having a follow-up, open discussion to the event. Furthermore, workshop participants suggested a number of topics for future Connectivity Series sessions. Topics included hostile work environment, leadership training, project management training, bias in the administration, deaf/hearing biases and issues at the university level, mentoring women faculty for leadership roles, and aligning expectations for performance evaluations.

**Conclusion**

This interactive and engaging workshop provided a forum in which participants discussed key issues in faculty hiring and departmental climate. Attendance was excellent, and the workshop evaluations were strong. In the evaluation survey, participants provided valuable feedback about the workshop, recommended key ways to improve future Connectivity Series offerings, and suggested topics to incorporate into future Connectivity Series offerings. The Michigan Players shared a number of insights, strengths, and needs observed during this workshop at RIT. The insights from this workshop will provide a basis for upcoming AdvanceRIT initiatives and events that will strengthen the professional development of members of the RIT community.