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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the existing inter- and intra-departmental phenomena. Current practices of forming departments and aggregating departments into colleges are investigated and are shown to have inherent difficulties which inhibit the performance of a university. These difficulties are illustrated with empirical data from a representative set of 42 major institutions with responses from faculty, administration, legislators, and board members. Two major types of alternatives are presented to the typical departmental organization: (1) replacing departments with functional organizations, and (2) adding other structures to the typical college that combine departments in terms of variables such as their resource utilization, staffing patterns, instructional, missions, etc. (Author)

DEPARTMENTS: PROBLEMS AND ALTERNATIVES

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This paper focuses chiefly on the problems of departments in the major universities, where the problems appear in an acute form, but the comments made here may be extrapolated to fit departments in four-year colleges and non-research-oriented universities, as long as the extrapolators are aware of my original emphases. Writers on higher education have pointed out many current problems associated with departments (Anderson, 1968; Dressel & Faricy, 1972; Dressel, Johnson, & Marcus, 1970; Dressel & Reichard, 1970; Gross, N., 1963; Shoben, 1970; Wolfle, 1971). Rather than discussing such problems in this paper, I shall indicate factors I see underlying them, and suggest some possible steps toward easing them.

One of the causes of problems involving departments is their great diversity. Obviously, departments differ in many respects: subject matter, size, objectives, student and faculty characteristics, and forms of governance, just to name a few. Further, we can assume that departments are affected differently by their environments -- which include a community as well as a university -- although we have no clear understanding of these relationships, and little research has been done in this area (as examples of such research, see Darkenwald, 1971; Halsey, 1960). Without a typology or some other means of dealing with the extreme diversity among departments, we cannot make valid generalizations about departments, as McConnell (1967) has pointed out. Until we can generalize about departments, we cannot seriously discuss the chairman's role or the department's decision-making process, either

within the same institution or across institutions. Also, we cannot improve departmental operations if we cannot form generalizations which can serve as criteria for evaluations.

A second fundamental cause of departmental problems has many facets and many names, such as autonomy, compartmentalism, self-interest, egocentricity, selfishness, or introversion. Here, I shall call it separatism. In terms borrowed from psychology, the department is autistic and consequently it is both alienated and alienating. This characteristic has undoubtedly been encouraged by the specialism and individualism that is typical of modern intellectual inquiry as well as by professors' tendancy to create departments in their own image. Neal Gross (1963, p. 65) states, "the nature of academic work itself predisposes toward an individualistic in contrast to a collective orientation." The departments' fundamental self-centeredness seems inherent in most universities' structures; on most campuses, the reward system, the organizational patterns, and the faculty attitudes all work together to reinforce separatism.

Departments have also been said to seek only to preserve the status quo, to be unwilling and unable to meet the issues of social change. But criticising a department for being thus true to its nature is rather like criticising a fish for not walking better. As currently constituted and organized, a department will rarely or never put society's concerns before its own concerns.

To sum up: as a type of organization, the contemporary department has two important characteristics, diversity and separatism. These

characteristics, plus the peculiar academic environment, inevitably lead departments to conflict, competition, non-communication, reactionism, and many other dysfunctional situations. Conflict, for instance, is inevitable in the university because it is inherent in the departments' operations -- as it would be in any system -- when the department seeks primarily its own interests, even though its interests do not necessarily coincide with those of other groups. In Hutchins' (1967) view, the department "exists, like every other subhuman organism, for the survival, reproduction, and expansion of itself. It has no knowledge of the rest of the universtty, and cannot acquire any. Other departments are its natural enemies." (See also Darkenwald, 1971)

This situation in higher education is highly intractable because the faculty -- although it largely consists of self-directing professionals -- cannot by itself initiate changes in the department system, and should not be expected to do so. The academic structure and the research-oriented reward system has in some ways been securely fastened on to the faculty, and as long as the faculty is in this system, they cannot change it without changing the essential conditions of their employment, and possibly changing for the worse. Change and, hopefully, improvement will probably have to come from outside the department, or even from outside the universitv.

Thus, part of the departments' problems require solutions that are practical and political, depending chiefly on the people involved. But these problems also need another kind of solution -- one more important but less likely to be seen clearly, like the bottom part of an

iceberg -- and that other solution is philosophical. We will never solve the practical problems if we try to treat them without tending to their philosophical underpinnings. The university might prove to be no more immune to disaster than was the unsinkable Titanic.

The theoretical confusion surrounding the department has two aspects: one is the irrational, inconsistent principles by which departments are differentiated and combined; another is the unclear, inadequate conception of the department as a type of organization. These aspects are like two sides of the same coin.

Departments usually are set up to treat a certain segment of intellectual subject matter, a so-called discipline. But disciplines are man-made; they can assume a multitude of forms depending on how one divides the intellectual terrain into different segments. It is not surprising that different institutions have developed different sets of disciplines, since institutions often differ in their philosophies. But when several different kinds of disciplines exist in the same institution, that suggests a harmful lack of consensus on basic ideas.

Further, disciplines are not the only basis for organizing departments (Dressel et al., 1970, pp. 9-10). Departmental subject matters include technologies, historical eras, geographical regions, or areas of application. New academic subject matters have continuously been developed during this century.

The lists of departments in the catalogs of two major universities (the University of Minnesota and Michigan State University) indicate

at least 10 bases for differentiating a department, that is, 10 different kinds of subject matter: single disciplines, mixed disciplines, sub-disciplines, combined sub-disciplines, quasi-disciplines, technologies, combined disciplines and technologies, general studies, practical arts, and areas of application (Faricy, 1972, p. 7-8).

Of course, one might ask: Is this diversity so harmful? Isn't this an example of healthy American pluralism? And I would answer: First, I am not critizing the diversity of departments, but the diversity and contradictoriness of the principles by which we establish or interrelate departments. Second, a pluralistic system at the institutional level might be tolerable or even fruitful, as long as institutions can still understand one another's positions; but within a single institution, this conceptual diversity hinders communication and coordination. On the practical level it leads directly to the chronic conflict and self-destructive competition educators so often deplore; and on the theoretical level it clouds all issues, impedes serious discussion and ultimately discourages the use of rationality.

Like the principles that we use to differentiate departments, the principles used to combine them are also confused and inadequate. Many universities combine all of their academic departments into a single college of arts and sciences, thereby putting together departments that may be dissimilar in subject matter and methodology. This structure is not only theoretically confused, but such a single college is often too big to be managable.

When departments are grouped into divisions or smaller colleges along lines of disciplinary similarity, the situation is not much better.

Departments may be more homogeneous within a division -- although that is highly questionable -- but then the problem of relations across divisional lines arises.

Whatever organizational pattern is used, it is almost always based on principles of similarity among subject matters. But subject matter is only one of the elements of a department. A department's essential elements also include its human, financial, and material resources; its organizational structure; its managerial policies and procedures; its curriculum; its products; and its objectives. Thus, the inadequate principles for interrelating departments reflect a second theoretical inadequacy.

The second aspect of theoretical confusion is that we have no clear, precise, and adequate conception of the academic department in American higher education. On the one hand, the departments' usual definition implicitly includes several functions that may be incompatible -- several levels of instruction as well as research and service (Gross, N., 1963, pp. 59-62). But on the other hand, the departments' definition usually excludes many aspects that are important determining factors for a department's operations and relations. For example, the department as an agent of occupational socialization has largely been ignored, although that is one of its important functions within the institutionalized social system (Gottlieb, 1961; Rosen, 1967).

Edward Gross (1968) suggests that universities have usually been viewed either as social institutions or as communities, and that while both of these conceptions reflect certain aspects of the university, they do not explain the whole situation. He believes that universities

could be better understood if we considered them as formal organizations. If we extend Gross's analysis to the department, we could say the department can also be viewed either as a social institution or as a community (that is, a peer group or interest group). But those conceptions are entirely inadequate to express actual departmental operations in contemporary universities. We must view the department as a formal organization with a variety of goals and usually with highly complex sets of functions, members, and governance patterns. (Examples of relevant research are: Dressel & Faricy, 1972, pp. 28-47; Haas & Collen, 1963; Hagstrom, 1971; Hobbs & Anderson, 1971; Warriner & Razak, 1969.)

To begin to work out a clearer idea of the department, we need a lot more thinking and a lot more research. To illustrate a type of research that might improve the situation, I would offer a study I conducted with Dr. Paul Dressel for the Departmental Study Project at Michigan State University in 1971-72, supported by a grant from the Esso Educational Foundation (Faricy, 1972).

The study sought to group departments according to characteristics other than the academic subject matters. The 79 academic departments at Michigan State were assigned to groups by means of a cluster analysis technique based on the departments' correlations on 16 sets of variables. These 16 sets of variables resulted from a cluster analysis of 167 departmental traits. The departmental traits used as data in this study included information on the enrollments, production, instructional offerings, faculty, and expenditures for each department.

The particular version of cluster analysis used in this study had two parts: first, a matrix of product-moment correlations from which an initial set of clusters was derived; and second, a multiple-group analysis that indicated the relationship (loading) of each department (or trait) to its cluster. This technique is described in Hunter & Cohen, 1969.

From this complicated correlation and clustering process, I established a function-related typology with six categories or basic types: agricultural sciences, health sciences, service-oriented technology, humanities and general studies, scientific disciplines, and applied science and technology. The first three departmental types formed a class of departments in which instruction was mainly on the graduate and upper-division undergraduate levels, with a small full-time faculty and relatively many graduate assistants; the last three departmental types formed another class in which instruction was mainly on the lower-division undergraduate level, with a relatively large full-time and part-time faculty and few graduate assistants.

The results of this study seemed interesting and generally supported my own developing notions of university structures. However, the specific groupings that emerged should be considered illustrative of what this sort of study can do, rather than definitive, because of certain methodological flaws that became apparent as the study progressed. The limitations were chiefly in the data. For one thing, the available information was inadequate to describe all departmental functions; for example, the category of laboratory sections at MSU includes laboratories for both physical sciences and for musical instruments. For another

thing, the use of clusters of variables proved unsatisfactory, because the effects of certain departmental traits were lost within a cluster and could not be properly observed.

This study indicated that departments can be formed into meaningful groups according to relationships that are inherent in the departments' modes of operation rather than according to their subject matters. In this study, the departmental groups were determined chiefly on the basis of departments' mission and resource deployment. Although the groups appeared at first to coincide with general areas of subject matters -- such as agricultural sciences -- upon a closer look one could see that the groups actually included departments whose subject matters were quite dissimilar, such as Food Science and Forestry. The groups coincided more closely with colleges than with subject matters.

Solving the problems that surround departments means coming to grips with departments' diversity and separatism. We can proceed in the theoretical areas by seriously expanding current efforts to analyze departments' roles and functions, to develop data adequate for expressing the full reality of departmental operations, and to apply the best available research techniques to all aspects of departments. All of these efforts should be based firmly on a conception of the department as a highly complex entity that combines the characteristics of a social institution, a community of interests, and a goal-oriented organization, as an entity with several elements or aspects that are essential to its functions.

On the practical side, diversity and separatism could perhaps be subdued by new structural arrangements based on a better understanding

of the department. Several critics have already commented that in universities, the structures are out of kilter with the functions (Dressel & Reichard, 1970; Gross, N., 1963). Spurr (1968) proposed a dual structure, with one pattern based on subject matters and another based on "interdisciplinary groupings," a structure similar to those in use at the University of California campuses at Santa Cruz and San Diego (apparently with some mixed success). However, in Spurr's proposal, the two sorts of academic units are involved only with subject matter, which does not accord with the actual situation in universities. At Santa Cruz and San Diego, college systems have been set up parallel to the departmental system, but apparently the separatism of the subject-matter-based departments has not as yet been deeply affected by the colleges since the departments still dominate the faculty reward system. Any significant change in the university structure would probably have to involve not only dual but plural units, reflecting the departments' real complexity.

If one were to begin with the departments more or less as they exist today in most universities, one could interrelate them in several new patterns, possibly in over-lapping or simultaneous configurations, each based on one or several departmental elements, such as one grouping based on subject matters, another based on curriculum and course offerings, a third grouping based on expenditure patterns, and so on. (Vreeland and Bidwell, 1966, classified departments according to their effects on students.)

One could also go further and totally disintegrate the departments, allowing the faculty and students to come together in several groupings

defined by functions -- instruction, research, curriculum planning, disciplinary interests, community service or so on. Jencks and Riesman (1969, pp. 523-7) also suggest a bold step; they state that "abolishing old departments and establishing new ones must . . . be a continuing process," and also that "there is a good deal to be said for curtailing the departments' powers and distributing them to smaller groups." Ikenberry (1972, p. 31) has proposed "task oriented units as a supplement or as an alternative to the academic department." Non-departmental structures have already been set up in a few places: for an entire institution, at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay; and for separate professional units, in the Institute of Technology and the School of Business Administration at Southern Methodist University.

The essential requirement of any such restructuring is that it be conceived in terms of a specific, concrete situation, that it reflect actual relationships among the functional units within an organization. Each American university is unique, determined by a particular history and a particular environment. One of the deficiencies in our current understanding of higher education is that we have not yet advanced beyond the level of specific situations to reach a general theory of the university and its departments (a situation described well by Moran, 1968). But the obverse is true, also; we have tended to treat certain developments in a specific institution as if they were generalizable concepts or patterns, and to apply them to other institutions that were not really comparable. This process has been repeated many times in the past century, for many so-called innovations: the elective system, general education, seminars, residential colleges, university colleges, Ph.D. programs, college aptitude exams, P.P.B.S., and -- not the least of these novelties -- the academic department.

What we need now is research and analysis that can help us grapple with both the general and the specific aspects of our institutions of higher education, and to guide us toward new structural arrangements that can help us establish new, fruitful relationships. "No single solution is possible," said Clark Kerr (1970, pp. 119-121), "situations vary from campus to campus and within a campus from one major function to another. . . . There can be no clear preference for one solution versus another solution on principle, given the nature of the academic institution."

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