

## *Fitting Into the Department*

James C. McCroskey  
*West Virginia University*

Students typically see teachers as *the* power source in colleges and universities. Many new teachers, particularly graduate assistants serving as teachers for the first time, have similar perceptions. In fact, individual classroom teachers typically have comparatively little control over the environment in which they work.

Teaching is a profession that functions within complex organizations—departments, colleges, universities, university systems. Virtually all instruction that occurs in today's institutions of higher education is part of a highly coordinated educational system, one in which all of the parts are very much interrelated.

Systems are successful only to the extent that their components are successfully interrelated. Universities are composed of interrelated colleges. Colleges are composed of interrelated departments. Departments are composed of interrelated faculty members. A faculty member who thinks he or she can operate in an autonomous fashion is likely to be viewed by others as a "loose cannon." Such people are viewed as dangerous to the system, and are likely to be "thrown overboard" the first time the opportunity arises.

### ACADEMIC FREEDOM

One of the most valued rights of university faculty members is "academic freedom." Unfortunately, it is also the most misunderstood. Academic

freedom is the freedom of a teacher to state the truth as he or she sees it without fear of losing her or his position or otherwise being punished for the views expressed. It is the right of a teacher to speak out when he or she sees injustice in society, to support whatever political candidate or position he or she chooses, and to challenge the views of established authority. In short, this is the academic version of the right held by everyone in American society—the freedom of speech.

Unfortunately, many teachers misinterpret this right to mean that they have the freedom to teach anything in any way they please in their classrooms. Academic freedom relates to *political* issues, not to *academic* ones. Colleges are regularly forbidden to teach subject matter that is deemed more appropriate for another college. Departments are restricted from teaching content that has been assigned to another department. Within a given department, faculty are restricted from teaching content in one course that is determined to be part of a different course. Such restrictions are necessary. Otherwise, students could be subjected to the same content over and over while never having the opportunity to study things that they may need or want. Of course, anyone who has been a student knows that some needless overlap continues to exist, and some courses include materials that are of interest to no one other than the teacher teaching them. Such problems, however, are not caused by academic freedom, they are a function of one or more people ignoring or abdicating their responsibility to exercise appropriate control in the academic environment.

Control in most academic institutions of today follows a top-down path. Whoever is in control of the purse is in control of the institution. In practice, however, most control as regards individual courses is exercised at the departmental level. This occurs as a function of appropriate delegation of authority from upper levels. Every course must be approved by some unit before it can become a part of a university's curriculum, and the approval authority normally is delegated to some faculty unit—often a group of faculty members elected by their peers. Such groups frequently are known as "curriculum committees." They may exist at every level of the institution. However, because content specialists generally exist only at the departmental level, this is the level that serves the primary function of screening out inappropriate courses. This function may be performed by a departmental administrator, a faculty committee, or, particularly in smaller departments, by the faculty as a whole.

The new faculty member, then, enters a world not of his or her own making, a world full of special but not yet understood interests, a world with an unknown history, a world that is as likely to be hostile as it is to be friendly. It is a world in which the newcomer is free to say whatever he or she thinks, propose any changes he or she would like to make, and

everyone else is free to support the changes, ignore the suggestions, attack them, or simply shunt the newcomer altogether. It is up to the newcomer to fit in.

## DEPARTMENTAL HISTORY

If an observer looks at departments in the same field across a number of universities, regardless of the particular academic discipline, he or she most likely will be surprised at how different one department is from another. Some of the differences are obvious—size of the department, median age of the faculty, content that is emphasized, quality of the facilities, and the like. Other factors may be much less obvious but much more important to the new person's success. Near the top of that list is the manner in which the department is governed.

The manner in which a department is governed typically is a function of tradition. If one asks why a particular department is operated the way it is, the answer that usually is correct (although often not given) is because it has been operated that way for a long time. Senior faculty tend to dominate most departments and the more senior one gets, the more likely one believes the old maxim "If it isn't broken, don't fix it." Change comes only with considerable difficulty, or in the face of impending disaster, in most departments.

Tradition, then, is a driving force in most departments. The newcomer must become acquainted with that tradition as quickly as possible in order to avoid making serious errors in her or his dealings with people who have been in the department for a longer period. The first thing to determine is the basic political system. There are essentially four general systems that may be in place: autocracy, fiefdoms, democracy, and chaos.

### Autocracy

An autocracy exists when one individual, usually known as a "head" or "chair," or a small group of faculty members, makes all of the major decisions and judgments in the department. In such systems, the leader(s) may or may not consult with other people prior to making decisions. The decisions may be made with individual faculty members' best interests in mind, or the interests of people may not even be taken into account.

Under the autocratic system, rank becomes very important. The "head" or "chair" is at the top, followed by the full professors, the associate professors, the assistant professors, the instructors, the doctoral as-

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sistants, the masters assistants, and so on. The value of a person's opinions is roughly equal to the rank that that person holds in the system. The opinions of new people, particularly those holding graduate assistantships, are viewed with minimum concern.

People brought up with the traditional American values for democracy often react very negatively to an autocratic system, particularly when they first enter. Their instinct is to fight, an instinct that, if not kept under control, will almost certainly result in negative consequences for the newcomer. The new person entering an autocratic system should keep in mind that it was the autocrat who decided to allow them to enter, and it is reasonable to assume that the autocrat wants to see them do well to demonstrate the wisdom of that decision.

The concept of the "benevolent" autocrat is an important one to understand. Although autocrats have the power to bring harm to the newcomer, they also have the power to provide many positive rewards. The decision of path for the autocrat to follow usually rests with the newcomer—the one who is supportive of the autocrat receives support in return. Benevolent autocrats are those who use their power to help the people under them. Few autocrats are so altruistic that they help those who choose to attack them. In large measure, then, a new person often has the choice of generating an enemy or a benevolent autocrat. Whether an autocrat is perceived as benevolent or not is a function of the relationship between the autocrat and the individual doing the perceiving.

### Fiefdoms

The system of fiefdoms is a special case of autocracy. Instead of having one person (or one small collective group at the top and in control), the department is broken (either formally or informally) into smaller units that have individuals (fiefs) in charge. These individuals are nominally subordinate to a person or persons above them, but in practice do pretty much whatever they want so long as they do not stray too far into some other fief's territory. Typically fiefs are identified by titles—such as basic course director, coordinator of graduate studies, head of the division of rhetoric, and associate chair for research.

Fiefs behave mostly like other autocrats. The rule of survival is "Those that go along, get along." It is up to the new person to make peace with the various fiefs with or under whom he or she must work. Getting in trouble with a fief is tantamount to getting in trouble with the head autocrat. When pushed, the person over the fief will almost always support the fief when there is a conflict with a new person.

Within the fief system is a high sense of territoriality. Each fief has an intellectual or administrative territory over which he or she reigns. The

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fief approaches the new person with the basic attitude of "I've got mine. You do what you want, but don't mess with my area." Typically, there are areas within the department over which no one appears to reign. These are open to individuals to build upon, if they do so carefully.

### Democracy

The idealized political system in a department is democracy. Many new teachers assume that all departments are run in a democratic manner—one person, one vote. In practice, that rarely occurs. In most departments it is recognized that some people, by nature of their background, experience, and/or rank, are "more equal" than others. The closest most departments come to democracy is a "consensus" system. Formal votes are taken only rarely, but everyone is asked for their input. If "significant opposition" to a decision emerges, that decision is not made until the opposition is dealt with. The significance of the opposition usually is determined by the status of the opposers.

Democracy is often chosen as a departmental system in revolt against an autocratic system with which people have become dissatisfied. Frequently, the outcome is the replacement of one undesirable system with another. Although democracy is not a bad system, democracy that gets completely out of control can be. It is not uncommon for a democratic system in a department to become a dictatorship of the majority. A coalition of faculty within the department simply takes over and votes down anything they do not want, even if it means trampling on the needs of the minority. Even more common is what has been called "rampant democracy." When this breaks out, people begin to complain about being "committed" or "meetinged" to death. Some departments literally have a vote on such matters as how many paper clips to purchase or when other people will hold office hours.

For the new person who enters a department with a democratic system, the road ahead poses many pitfalls. It is critical that the new person be supported by a majority of the established people. These are the people who will determine such things as where (maybe even whether) the new person has an office, what that person will teach, when it will be taught, and, most importantly, whether the person will be retained.

### Chaos

The last system is, essentially, no system. Chaos often results when a powerful person or persons leave the department. This may be the result of promotion (to dean, for example), death, retirement, or resignation.

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Any relatively sudden departure of powerful people may leave a gap in the system. The time when this typically is felt most is at the beginning of a school year, exactly at the time when a new person is most likely to enter the system.

Whether the system in the past has been autocratic or democratic, specific people have been present to keep the system functioning. Only the fiefdom approach is relatively secure from the loss of a powerful person. In that system, most of the "system managers" are still in place, and only one needs to be replaced. Under conditions of chaos, tussels for power and control are likely to be common. Unless a new person has been employed specifically to replace a departed person in the same role, a new person has little chance of surviving such tussels and emerging on top. The wiser course is to avoid such battles.

Such a choice may be difficult to make, because no one may really know who is in charge. This circumstance often results when a person is appointed "interim" chair to replace a departed chair. The whole political system is, at least temporarily, "up for grabs." There may be pressure on the new person from many quarters, and too little information available to permit wise decisions.

The preceding discussion of the various departmental political systems that a new person may encounter is intended to sensitize you to the kinds of problems you may face as a new person in a department. No one of them is inherently easier to survive than another. The key to survival is to recognize what system exists and establish positive relationships with as many of the relevant decision makers in the system as possible. Always remember: The department got along without you before you came. It probably can get along quite well again if it gets rid of you.

## THE BASIC COURSE

Almost all departments in academic institutions offer "basic" courses in their disciplines. New people are the ones most likely to be assigned to teach such courses. Hence, one's first experience as a faculty member in most disciplines is with the basic course.

In the communication field, it is unusual for a graduate assistant never to have any assignment with a basic course. In excess of 90% of all graduate assistants in most communication departments are involved in the teaching of the basic course. The nature of that involvement varies drastically from department to department.

Basic courses in most communication departments exist primarily to serve students who are majoring in other disciplines. They may be content or skills courses; they may center on public speaking, on interper-

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sonal communication, on mass communication, on communicating in organizations, on rhetorical theory, on communication theory, or on some combination of those—or even something entirely different.

There is no standard for what the basic course in communication will be from department to department. Thus, it is likely that a new person entering a department will be confronted with a different type of basic course than he or she has seen or taken previously. This is particularly problematic if the department has a relaxed approach to the course. Sometimes the new person simply is given a text and told to teach the course. In some cases, there is a common syllabus, in some there is not. In some cases, the new person is not given either a text or a syllabus—he or she is simply told to teach the course. All that is provided is the course title and catalog description. In contrast, some departments provide a complete package for their basic course as well as extensive training for new people in how to teach it. In general, the degree of freedom in teaching the basic course is inversely related to the degree of assistance one is provided for teaching the course. Generally, the more the department values the basic course, the more assistance is provided and the less flexibility is permitted.

How much a new teacher of the basic course is valued is partially dependent on how much the basic course is valued by the department. Some departments virtually live off of the basic course. For others, the basic course is considered a necessary evil: No one wants it, but someone has to do it. It is not unusual for departments to delegate the basic course to one person (the basic course fief) and turn its collective head away. Researchers may look to the basic course as the source of compliant subjects. The university may look at it as a place to put masses of students who must take something. Other disciplines may look at the course as a valuable contributor to their students' education, or as a source of too many high grades. In some places, the basic course is the battle ground for opposing intellectual forces within the department. Will the public speaking or the interpersonal forces reign supreme? Shall we teach the masses about the media or the postpubescents about female-male relationships?

There are probably as many views of the basic course as there are viewers. If there is a right and correct view, it has yet to receive the acclamation it deserves. Nevertheless, as a new person in a department, you are almost certain to be exposed to the "truth" about the basic course soon after your arrival. To survive, it is best for you to go along with whatever is the prevailing view. As a new person, your chances of introducing significant change in the department's approach to the basic course are nil. However, if you make a significant amount of noise about it, you might be labeled a "problem person." Problem people constantly run into problems.

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## THE CURRICULUM—WHERE DO I FIT?

A department's curriculum is the set of courses that the department offers. But it is more than that. It is the external manifestation of the department's history and philosophy. It provides the justification for the existence of the department and the individual members of that department. It is the definition of that department both to students and to faculty members of other departments. In many ways, it *is* the department.

In many instances, a new person is employed explicitly to teach a certain course or courses in that curriculum. Even so, the new person's niche is far from guaranteed. Sometimes, one or more continuing members of the department want to take over those courses, to change them, or even to abolish them. The new person may almost immediately be put on the defensive by challenges from older department members.

It is not unnatural for a faculty member, new or not, to become possessive of a course he or she has been assigned to teach and to become defensive if that course is attacked. It is easy to forget that no faculty member "owns" any course. As teachers of courses, we are, at most, temporary custodians even if we created them. Courses belong to universities. They may be, and sometimes are, moved from one department to another, and even from one college to another.

Assumed ownership of courses causes many problems and conflicts in departments, not the least of which are problems that may be encountered by new people. A person who has taught a course in the recent past, who decided he or she did not what to teach it again, and who participated in the hiring of a new person to handle that responsibility, still may feel possessive of the course. Although all faculty members must take care to avoid undue possessiveness of courses, it is particularly important for the new faculty member to be sensitive to the causes of such responses and to avoid stimulating "ownership" reactions. One of the best ways to do this is to ask the former faculty of the course for advice. New people usually have no knowledge of the problems that have been confronted (and often solved) by their predecessors, so such advice may be extremely valuable. Even if it isn't, just being asked for it may help the other person accept the transition with less hostility. One of the worst ways to approach this new responsibility is to criticize how the course was handled previously and profess the intention to "make improvements." Such criticism will be heard as criticism of the person who taught the course before. Even if that person is no longer in the department, do not forget that friends of that person most likely still are.

One of the more difficult things for new people to deal with is having someone in charge of a course or program whom they feel has less qualifi-

cations than they possess. Almost everyone agrees that the most qualified person is the one who should be in charge. Unfortunately, far fewer people agree on what constitutes "most qualified."

The wise course for the new person is to keep his or her opinions about qualifications private. If the opinions are clearly wrong, this will avoid the embarrassment of being demonstrably wrong. If they are right, it is very likely that others will reach the same conclusions in due course. The key is "in due course," and that almost always represents more time than the new person would prefer to wait. Impatience is a fault that few new people can afford to exhibit. People who have been in systems for some time expect new people to "pay their dues" before they are granted full privileges as a member of the system. Exhibiting an unwillingness to be patient most commonly results in a longer, not a shorter, period of "dues paying" before being accepted as a true member of the system.

At some time or other, everyone in higher education must serve as a "new person" in a system. For most of us, this experience will be repeated several times over the course of our professional lives. It can be viewed as an opportunity to start afresh, accept new challenges, and make new friends, or it can be seen as knocking down barriers to doing what one really wants to do. Those who take the former view have a very good chance of being accepted into the new system and being successful in it. Those who take the latter view represent a problem waiting to happen. The new person makes the choice of which course to follow.

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