Crossing over to the Dark Side:
Translating Faculty Evaluation Research into Academic Policy and Practice

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(This document presents only the highlights of various points explored in the presentation and does not include the entire content or text.)

The Challenge

One of the constant and frustrating challenges for those of us working in the field of faculty evaluation is that of bringing the results of research into the arena of everyday academic policy and practice. Even after decades of research on such issues as the validity and reliability of student ratings, the proper use and interpretation of student ratings, and the important link between faculty evaluation and faculty development, many faculty evaluation systems in use across the country are built on 'common knowledge' of dubious validity derived from anecdotes and the personal biases of individual administrators. The issue that I would like to address this evening is how those of us in the educational research community can work to bring the benefits of research in faculty evaluation into the everyday operation of colleges and universities.

To do this I will first explore the world of academic administration – a world that George Will, in a recent column, referred to as being comprised of 'dens of patronage and corruption'. After that exploration I will suggest some strategies we might use to more directly influence academic administrators to implement policies and practices on their campuses that reflect some of the findings that have resulted from decades of faculty evaluation research.

The Dark Side

The realm of academic administration is often referred to as the 'dark side'. I'm uncertain as to whether George Lucas in his Star Wars movies derived the term from its academic usage or whether faculty adopted the term after noting pronounced similarities between Darth Vader and certain academic administrators. However, as a faculty member who has, from time to time wandered into the academic administrative arena, I can vouch for the fact that not only is the administrative realm stranger than faculty imagine, it is stranger than faculty *can* imagine.

The main point, though, is that if the educational research community is to see the fruits of its scholarship brought into actual academic policy and practice it must understand, and deal with, the realities of the academic administrative world. It is also a world of amateurism in terms of administrative skills and ignorance of research concerning the entire higher education enterprise.

Addressing the Challenge

Administrative Amateurism

Two years ago at the 2003 convention in Chicago Mike Theall, Larry Aleamoni, and I presented a paper entitled "Beyond Scholarship: Recognizing the Multiple Roles of the Professoriate." In that paper we expanded on a concept that I have been working on for a number of years that examines the roles faculty may play in terms of the skill sets required. That is, we examined the skill sets required for the roles of Teaching, Scholarly & Creative Activities, Service, and Administration. In looking at the skill sets required for Administration we determined that the administrator's original content expertise (mathematics, psychology, music, history, etc.) rarely, if ever, came into play in everyday administrative duties. Instead, skills in such areas as conflict management, group process, team building, human resource management, facilities management, budget planning, and policy analysis and development were the ones that were most frequently called upon. Yet, few if any academic administrators have received formal training or education in these skills. Thus, for the most part, academic administrators either lack the skills, or at best, are amateurs, in those areas of administrative performance that constitute the bulk of their daily responsibilities.

There is no quick solution to this problem although some institutions, such as the University of Tennessee, have instituted major administrator training programs that introduce them to the concepts of leadership, conflict management, and group process. The best thing the educational research community could do in this regard is to develop an effective administrator evaluation system, with appropriate rating forms, that might reasonably adopted by the academy. The problem of selling this idea, however, has been that most administrator evaluation systems produce results that are, by and large, negative. And, since the administration makes the decision as to whether to expend the resources on such systems, they have not been universally adopted. One administrator with whom I've worked on such a project noted that he thought that all academic administrator ratings were probably going to range from a high of 'poor' to a low of 'throw the bum out'. Thus, the challenge facing us as educational researchers is to provide an appropriate normative model.

Ignorance of Educational Research.

Academic administrators generally start out as faculty with a professional interest and expertise in a specific content field. To the degree that their administrative duties permit, academic administrators are more likely to keep up with the literature in their original content field rather than suddenly switch to reading the educational research literature. At best, they may take up reading the Chronicle of Higher Education – a publication with a clear bias against the use of student ratings.

As educational researchers in the area of faculty evaluation we can do several things to address this problem.

- Stop writing so many technical articles on student ratings (which administrators rarely read) and start writing articles for publications that academic administrators DO read. (Such as Magna Publication's *Academic Leader,* or Anker Publication's *Department Chair*). Simplify, or even over-simplify, certain technical terms or concepts since academic administrators are more likely to be thinking in terms of the colloquial definitions of validity and reliability rather than technical, psychometric ones.
- Recognize faculty efforts to bring the results of research into general academic practice as a worthy form of scholarship in promotion and tenure decisions.
- Mount a major campaign to have some basic elements of academic leadership, instructional design, instructional delivery, and instructional assessment included in the graduate curricula of all disciplines.

Politics

There are two main arenas in which politics ultimately affects the design and implementation of faculty evaluation systems – the legislative arena for public institutions, and the appointment and configuration of governing boards for both private and public institutions. Politics, of course, plays a major role in determining who gets appointed to a governing board of an institution. By and large, successful business people who have made lots of money, contributed lots of money to politicians, are retired, and still need to feel somehow useful are the people that get appointed to governing boards. Such individuals, by virtue of their past success, feel more than qualified to guide an educational institution. After all, if 'those who can't do, teach' then those who have been successful in 'real life' can certainly run a college or university system.

I have found that making presentations to governing boards that address the larger issues of accountability in higher education (a topic with which they are always concerned) to be a good strategy. Relating, in simple, non-technical terms, the concept of faculty evaluation as a well-designed, scientifically-based segment of the overall accountability effort of the institution has, in my experience proven to be an effective strategy in dealing with governing boards.

Mandates

If we are to be successful in translating research findings into academic policy and practice it is important to understand the relationship among mandates, policies, procedures, and practices. The last two pages of this paper provide an example of a Policy Development Guide used by the University of Tennessee Health Science Center that more fully explores the relationship.

Across higher education there are many mandates that relate to faculty evaluation. Some states legislatively require faculty evaluation data to be made public; some Governing Boards require the dean or department chair to visit the classroom as a key part of the faculty evaluation process; some accrediting agencies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools requires that instruction be evaluated and the results be used to ensure quality. Although it is easy to get caught up in the procedure or practice involved in faculty evaluation, we must focus our efforts first on the mandates. Not only must we closely examine the mandates that guide our institutions to find the ones that directly or indirectly impact faculty evaluation, we must also analyze the policies to determine if the mandate is, in fact, appropriately responding to the mandate.

In working with many different institutions in helping them build a new, or revise their old, faculty evaluation systems I always start by familiarizing myself with their mandates. These are found in the Charter and Bylaws that establish the institution, Governing Board directives, relevant state statutes, and, occasionally, judicial decisions resulting from a lawsuit filed by a faculty member or a faculty union. I then move to the formal statements of policies that respond to, or are derived from, their mandates. Then, based on research findings in the faculty evaluation literature, I develop an alternate statement of procedure and practice. In this way the academic administrator immediately sees the proposed faculty evaluation procedure as clearly linked to a mandate by which the institution is bound.

Sometimes, however, a mandate specifies a procedure. In those cases a little creativity is necessary. For example, if a Board of Governors mandates a visit by the department chair to the classroom as a required part of the faculty evaluation process but does not specify a structure, procedure, criteria, or standards for the classroom observation, then we have a little 'wiggle-room' in which to be creative. The research literature tells us that a casual, unstructured, single visit to the classroom cannot easily provide valid and reliable data for use in a formal faculty evaluation program where the results are used for promotion and tenure. Alternately, the research literature suggests that even one visit to a classroom, as long as it is structured in some way, can provide meaningful and useful information in a faculty development effort. Obviously the mandate for the department chair to visit the classroom could not be ignored. The solution here was to define the faculty evaluation system as having a direct link to a faculty development program. A strategy for a structured classroom observation visit was developed and the results of the visit were used only for faculty development purposes. A further link with the faculty evaluation system that was developed, and which pleased the Board and the President, was that the faculty member produced an 'improvement plan' as a result of the visit. The 'improvement plan' then became one of the documents in the faculty member's evaluation portfolio that was counted as evidence in the section on professional growth and development.

Money

Insofar as faculty evaluation is concerned the biggest money pit (from the perspective of the academic administrator) is the use of student rating forms. Commercial ones such as the SIR II from ETS, the IDEA system from Kansas State, and Larry Aleamoni's CIEQ all cost money. These costs range, roughly, from about $1.00 to $1.50 per answer sheet. If student-rating forms are used in every class and an institution has several thousand students each taking 3 or 4 classes a term, it is easy to run up quite a bill. As a consequence, many institutions create their own forms and run them through their own test scoring machines and simply use the raw score as the 'evaluation.' Even then, a lot of paper is being used, and a staff must be maintained to package, distribute, receive, score, and return the student rating forms. The big rush to use online student rating forms is a direct result of the costs associated with this paper and processing.

The results of these efforts, however, have not all been uniformly successful and the cost issue related to the use of student ratings continues to loom large in administrative decision-making relative to faculty evaluation. There is no easy solution to this problem. The only reasonable solution appears to be making the results of the using student rating forms worth the cost. Currently the reports received by the faculty from the SIR II, the IDEA, and the CIEQ require a fairly sophisticated understanding of statistics. Although an error band or a decile score may appear extremely simple to understand to those of us in the faculty evaluation research field, to the English teacher, or Music teacher they appear as mysterious as the hieroglyphs on the remnants of the UFO that crashed in Roswell, New Mexico in the 1940's.

Educational researchers in faculty evaluation could contribute meaningfully to the issue of making valid and reliable student rating forms worth the cost but doing the work necessary to produce reports that are easily understandable to someone who has no understanding of, or even an interest in, statistics or psychometrics. Ideally, student ratings results should be produced not only as appropriate statistics, but also as written text that has the understandability of the horoscope in the daily newspaper.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

The following principles and definitions should be used in developing policies and procedures within the University of Tennessee Health Science Center.

Definitions:

Mandate: *An authoritative command or statement issued by a legislative, judicial, or accrediting body that authorizes, requires, constrains, or prohibits aspects of an organization's functioning. A policy statement issued by the President of the University of Tennessee is to be considered a mandate unless it conflicts with a legislative, judicial, or accrediting body's mandate that applies to the University of Tennessee Health Science Center.*

Policy: *A formal statement of a guiding principle, or course of action, intended to influence and determine the decisions and actions of an organization in complying with a mandate.*

Procedure: *A formally specified strategy or set of steps and actions by which an organization executes a policy.*

Practice: *Organizational 'habits' or optional methods of carrying out specified procedures. Practices may be adjusted to ensure proper execution of the procedure.*

Principles

1. *Institutional Mandates (including mission and goals as specified by UT Bylaws, THEC policies, and state, federal, and appropriate accrediting agencies) establish the policy and procedure parameters of the University of Tennessee Health Science Center.*

2. *Policies guide and establish the parameters for developing operational procedures.*
   a. *A policy may not* ***require*** *an action that a mandate specifically* ***forbids****.*
   b. *A policy may not* ***forbid*** *an action that a mandate specifically* ***requires****.*
   c. *A policy* ***may require or forbid*** *and action that a mandate* ***permits but does not require.***

3. *Procedures guide and establish the parameters for determining personnel requirements and organizational structure.*

Policy Statement Format & Structure

Policy statements must use the following format:

1. Name of the general policy section under which the policy falls.
2. A policy title with an appropriate assigned policy number and effective date.
3. A statement of intent – describing what the policy is intended to accomplish.
4. A reference to the mandate or mandates to which the policy responds.
5. A clear statement of the policy.
6. A description of the specific procedures that are to be carried out in implementing the policy.
7. A reference to any other policy or policies to which this policy is subordinate, responds to, or supports.

POLICY SECTION: Admission of Students Policy No:________

Title:____|______________
Effective Date

Statement of Intent: Describe what this policy is intended to accomplish.

Mandate Reference: Cite mandate to which this policy responds or supports.

Policy Statement:

Procedure: Description of procedures to be carried out in implementing this policy.

Other Policies: Cite other policy or policies to which this policy is subordinate, responds to, or supports.