

# Collegiality in the Academy Today

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Collegiality continues to be a much debated—and much valued—quality for today’s university faculty. It has a fraught history when used as a criterion for promotion and tenure; after all, how does one fairly evaluate collegiality, a personal characteristic, as part of a promotion dossier that emphasizes scholarship, teaching, and service?<sup>1</sup> Because of the difficulty in achieving a clear and precise definition of collegiality, as well as the possibility of squelching open debate and free speech, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) issued a statement in November 1999, which was subsequently revised in 2016, cautioning against the use of collegiality as a criterion for promotion and tenure cases: “Historically, ‘collegiality’ has not infrequently been associated with ensuring homogeneity and hence with practices that exclude persons on the basis of their difference from a perceived norm. The invocation of ‘collegiality’ may also threaten academic freedom. In the heat of important decisions regarding promotion or tenure, as well as other matters involving such traditional areas of faculty responsibility as curriculum or academic hiring, collegiality may be confused with the expectation that a faculty member display ‘enthusiasm’ or ‘dedication,’ evince ‘a constructive attitude’ that will ‘foster harmony,’ or display an excessive deference to administrative or faculty decisions where these may require reasoned discussion.” In this statement, the AAUP suggests the ways in which an emphasis on “collegiality” can unfortunately lead to coerced consensus and unquestioned, normative ways of thinking and behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Even as collegiality is debated as a criterion for promotion and tenure, recent surveys of university faculty suggest that faculty continue to value work environments in which collegial and collaborative working relationships are visibly and prominently part of the culture. This is an especially relevant concern at Purdue at the present moment: the 2018 COACHE (Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education) survey on job satisfaction showed that Purdue faculty members, compared to faculty at peer institutions, are more dissatisfied with diversity, inclusion,

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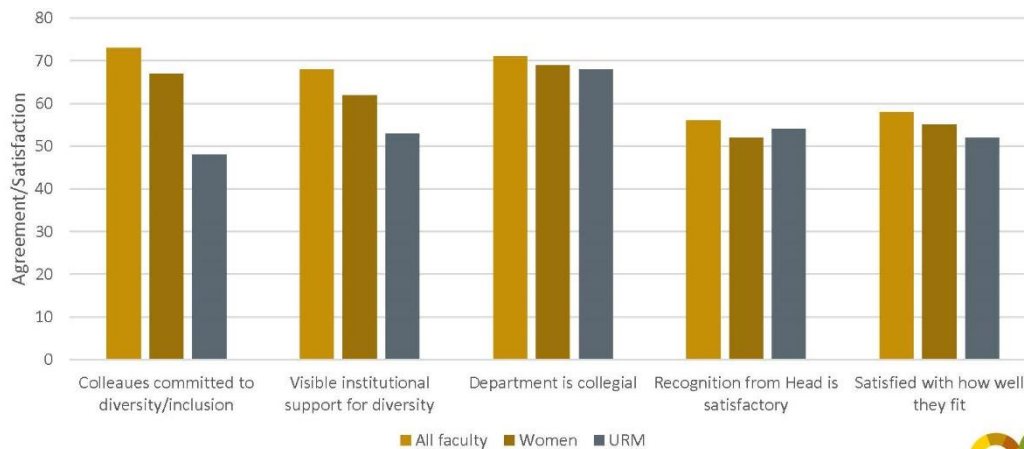
<sup>1</sup> See Balsmeyer, Haubrich, and Quinn (1996) for an interesting case study of using the Delphi technique to define “collegiality” and develop a set of criteria that would be used to evaluate collegiality for promotion and tenure cases as well as annual performance reviews. Robert Cipriano is one of the most notable researchers who advocates for collegiality as a “fourth criterion” for promotion and tenure, and he has spearheaded the development of a “Collegiality Assessment Matrix” (Cipriano 2015; Cipriano and Buller 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, universities continue to find ways to use collegiality as a condition of employment, and courts have upheld the use of collegiality for promotion and tenure, and termination, decisions. See Connell, Melear, and Savage (2011) for an overview of case law, a selection of recently adopted university policies, and a discussion of university policies concerning collegiality.

and collegiality in their departments and on campus. The graphic used to present this finding at a Faculty Town Hall meeting in January 2019 includes comparative responses for a range of related measures, suggesting that attitudes toward collegiality and a sense of belonging are inflected by gender and race/ethnicity:

## Diversity, Inclusion, and Collegiality

Lower than our peers and the COACHE cohort in these areas



Source: Office of the Provost, 2019 COACHE Survey Faculty Town Hall

In response to these survey results, the Provost’s Office at Purdue has highlighted action goals: to create a “Stronger focus on diversity and inclusion,” and to “Strengthen commitment to collegiality.” It remains to be seen how Purdue will follow through on this commitment, especially since establishing, nurturing, and sustaining a collegial environment among faculty, across a large campus, working in sometimes quite different and distinct environments, is a complicated and difficult objective. And even before strategies are discussed and adopted, coming to a well-informed understanding of what “collegiality” involves is crucial.

### Understanding Collegiality as a Network of Relations

“Collegiality” is often thought of as similar to, or the same as, “civility” or “good citizenship.” Indeed, civil behavior is necessary for faculty members to work together as colleagues, and one of the expectations of employment for faculty members is being a good citizen of one’s department, college, and university—in other words, doing a fair share of the service load. But collegiality involves more than civility or good citizenship. For instance, being “civil” is more akin to being polite, or being ready to say “Hello. How are you doing?” when you cross paths on campus. In other words, it does not take much effort to be civil. But “collegiality” requires more of people (and much more about this below, in relation to diversity); it requires respect and

reciprocity. It means working *together* as *colleagues*—not just divvying up service responsibilities and going off to individual offices. You have to know something meaningful about your co-workers to work as colleagues, and you have to be mutually committed to working together on an issue.

Conversely, a lack of collegial behavior is not the same as what some commentators identify as bullying or hostile intimidation. Faculty members who shout at clerical staff or at their colleagues in meetings, who criticize their fellow faculty members or supervisors at any opportunity, who publicly demean certain research topics and teaching methods (not their own, of course), who use derogatory terms or shout at students in class, or who implicitly or explicitly threaten colleagues (and this list could continue) are obviously incapable of being collegial, but more importantly, they are workplace bullies who need to be confronted by someone in authority immediately. The unit/department head is typically the direct supervisor, and so the head needs to intervene directly to assess the situation and to try to rein in bullies because such toxic behaviors do not resolve themselves on their own. At the same time, judicious assessment is crucial to make sure that reports of bullying behavior are credible and to ensure that expectations of normative behavior do not impose bias on faculty members of color (who may unfairly be labeled as “difficult” when they exercise authority or autonomy). The head needs to stand up for the whole department as a diverse community, and that means doing whatever it takes (calling on the assistance of Human Resources to develop written documentation of offending behavior and an action plan, or calling campus police in the case of physical violence or unsafe behavior) to counter toxic behavior that impedes a sense of belonging and productivity that all faculty and staff members deserve.<sup>3</sup>

Collegiality is vital; it is a network of relations and behaviors among people who are good colleagues—they collaborate and work as a team on issues important to students and faculty, to their department and university. Creating or sustaining a culture of collegial interactions requires a group effort, a long-term strategy, a building of mutual respect and trust in multiple ways and on many levels. It involves not only behaviors of individuals in a unit, it also reflects the unit’s climate and working environment. My perspective here is informed by a compelling definition of “collegiality” from James Bess, who identifies three distinct yet interlocking components of collegiality in a 1992 article: “collegiality as culture” (“c-collegiality”), “collegiality as structure” (“s-collegiality”), and “collegiality as behavior” (“b-collegiality”). By identifying three facets of collegiality and giving them distinct tags, Bess unpacks the complex constellation of meanings associated with collegiality. Indeed, his tripartite definition recognizes that individual actions and behavior, unit or department climate, and institutional or university structures all impact collegiality. Following his analysis, then, shows us that to achieve a productive sense of collaboration and collegiality requires efforts and strategies to be carried out at all three levels. It is my view that not only the department head but a critical mass of personnel in a department need to join efforts to build a community and culture that values working together toward a common goal.

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter 5 (“Bullies”) of Gunsalus’s (2006) book for specific strategies to address toxic individuals and behaviors in the academy.

## **The Importance of Collegiality**

In a 2009 article titled “Defending Collegiality,” Michael Fisher argues that universities cannot function effectively if communal, collaborative, and collegial relations are not prevalent. Because “the disintegration of community takes a special toll on academic workplaces,” Fisher promotes the adoption of a “code of conduct” to make sure that respect and civility prevail (2009:23). To underscore this point, Fisher cites the work of Robert Sutton, the author of a 2007 book titled *The No Asshole Rule*, who observes that in any given workplace “*negative interactions can have five times the effect on mood than positive interactions*” (2009:22). In other words, a workplace, or an academic unit, can be severely impaired in carrying out its key missions by hostile or demeaning actions.

I know this only too well. When I served as department head, one of my responsibilities was trying to assign committee service duties equitably to faculty members, and I soon learned that this task often took weeks of negotiation. As it turned out, there were a few faculty members whom no one would serve with, and so the idea of committee work as serving the common good had been forgotten. Clearly collegiality had broken down among some members, and without a sense of common mission and faculty members’ willingness to serve on committees, the department could not effectively function.

My experience taught me a couple of things. First, isolated negative interactions can have ripple effects that take a lot of concerted effort to push back against, so the head has to enlist the help of a critical mass of faculty who will intervene when necessary to model collegial behavior and actions—who will position themselves as allies for the common good. Second, the head has a key role to play. I initially used humor; I redefined committee work as “getting into a room with really smart people and having a free exchange of ideas on a topic that matters” to try to re-shape the negative attitude toward service of a few that had come to affect all of us. The idea of having people meet together, face-to-face, in one room perhaps seems rather quaint in our contemporary networked teaching and working environments, but one of the subtle steps that may lead to a breakdown of collegiality, in my experience, is an overreliance on email and Skype to hold meetings and discussions. Tonal variations, facial expressions, and body language do not translate well into e-discussions. Moreover, in virtual meetings, people do not have the opportunity to have informal, personal exchanges before or after the meeting; hence, they miss out on the everyday kind of social interactions vital to fostering collaboration and collegiality in departments.

Trying to create a climate and culture that make faculty members want to be in a room working with their colleagues is only the first step. What people do and say in the room matters too. Similarly, having civil discussions is only a first step; I contend that genuine collegiality—where colleagues understand, respect, and trust each other well enough to disagree and debate—will produce the best ideas and strategies on a given issue. To recognize and respect differing perspectives means, then, that diversity and inclusion are integrally related to productive working environments since collegiality necessarily involves conditions where co-workers see themselves as colleagues who can speak freely.

Being inclusive as an ethos, for me, is fundamental to establishing and sustaining collegiality. One reason some faculty and institutions have been reluctant to adopt collegiality as an official

criterion for promotion and tenure, or continued employment, is that there have been instances when collegiality has been aligned with “getting along” or “fitting in” with others. As Timothy Shiell reports in his article assessing the pros and cons of collegiality policies, “collegiality may be used as a basis to weed out those who ‘don’t fit,’ and those who ‘don’t fit’ tend to be women and members of ethnic, religious, racial, and other minorities” (2015). To push back against this kind of exclusionary thinking, we need to remind ourselves that collegiality should not be used to justify homogeneity, normativity, or coerced consensus. Indeed, anecdotal evidence, as well as recent scholarship, demonstrates the ways that gender, race, sexual orientation, and other kinds of difference impact how collegiality is experienced and perceived in the academy.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to foster a collegial culture if diversity, equity, and inclusion are not part of the cultural ethos as well.

While universities across the U.S. are eager to recruit and hire talented women, and people of color, to join their faculty, it is not enough to think of diversity as a statistical or demographic goal. Diversity and inclusion are important not only for representation but also for making available a range of new perspectives and solutions that faculty from marginalized or underrepresented populations bring to the institution. The goal should be not only to recruit and hire talented women, and people of color, but also to retain them by valuing their contributions and by creating opportunities whereby their departments and institutions are *transformed* by their presence.<sup>5</sup> I deliberately echo Black Feminist scholar bell hooks here: hooks has long advocated for “transforming the academy so that it will be a place where cultural diversity informs every aspect of our learning” (1994:33). hooks’s emphasis on how diversity and inclusion might radically re-shape the academy (especially in terms of teaching and learning) also holds true for our expectations of collegiality.<sup>6</sup> True collegiality among a diverse group of faculty involves a commitment to creating and maintaining an equitable, dynamic exchange of broad-ranging ideas and solutions. Practicing what I will call “inclusive collegiality” involves a fundamental openness to frank debate, as well as the recognition that very different perspectives on an issue might have equal weight and value. Most important, to really collaborate, to get the best ideas and plans on the table, people need to be as concerned about *listening* to another person’s ideas and perspectives as they are about *articulating* their own.

### **Institutional Challenges to Collegiality**

How faculty collaborate for the common good of a department’s mission when they occupy very different institutional positions (and privileges) is one of the institutional challenges to collegiality that is quite visible in today’s academy. We are in the midst of a broad reshaping of higher education in the U.S., one aspect of which is that non-tenure-track lines for faculty are

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<sup>4</sup> See Subramaniam (2019) for a recent article explaining how and why normative expectations of “niceness” can be disabling and oppressive for women and women of color in the academy.

<sup>5</sup> In 1998-99, Gloria D. Thomas interviewed twenty-four women of color about their experiences as scholars in the academy, and notably, most of them found being an agent of social change in the university to be an energizing factor that contributed to their sense of accomplishment and career satisfaction (2001).

<sup>6</sup> hooks puts her theory into practice when she co-directed a faculty workshop on transforming the curriculum at Oberlin College; see “Embracing Change: Teaching in a Multicultural World” in *Teaching to Transgress*. I am particularly inspired by her ability to practice compassion when engaging in critical dialogue with her colleagues.

becoming more prevalent than traditional tenure-track faculty lines. In addition to the distinction in faculty lines is the emergence of online education as an option sometimes preferred over on-campus residential university life. Faculty who teach online courses do not need to be physically present on campus to carry out their responsibilities; hence, daily interchanges with other faculty members—and the opportunity to build collaborative networks and a collegial atmosphere—may no longer be the norm. Clearly we are seeing faculty roles and lines redefined in ways we didn't anticipate even ten years ago, and these changes are proceeding at an accelerating pace, or so it seems.

Nathan Alleman and Don Haviland address the issue of collegiality for non-tenure-track faculty in a 2017 article; specifically, they use surveys and interviews to focus on how non-tenure-track faculty define collegiality and what their expectations of collegiality are. They limited their interviews to full-time non-tenure-track faculty working at two different universities, one a religiously affiliated R1 university, the other a unionized public institution that offers masters programs. Their need to control their subject pool is understandable, but I want to take a broader view of just how diverse and uneven the definition of faculty is today. At Purdue, for instance, we have tenure-track faculty, clinical faculty, research faculty, continuing lecturers (who may be full-time or part-time), and adjunct lecturers. Some of our departments or schools are quite large, while others are small and more cohesive or focused. Given the diversity of units and faculty/lecturer lines on the campus, the inculcation of collegial behavior and collegial culture is beset with difficulties, and clearly there can be no one set of strategies that will be effective in all contexts. It is important to emphasize the very challenging problem of creating collaborative and collegial relationships in a department that increasingly relies on adjunct lecturers to fulfill its teaching mission, some of whom (as is evident from recent articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education*) may be picking up one or two courses at two or three different institutions. Recently, Purdue has proposed raising the limit on continuing lecturers from 10 percent (to 15 percent) of the tenure/tenure-track faculty on campus. The changing demographics of our “colleagues” means that we need to find new ways to collaborate and build collegial relations.

Alleman and Haviland's article, in fact, raises some crucial questions given this changing nature of what it means to be a faculty member. To what degree do we invite continuing lecturers to collaborate with us—on teaching strategies and innovations, for instance? Do continuing lecturers have voting rights on departmental matters, especially on those that affect their own working and teaching conditions? How might we ensure that continuing lecturers have meaningful voices in department policies and decisions that affect them? Teaching is an especially promising site to bring different together different kinds of faculty to work toward the common good.<sup>7</sup> It would be fairly easy, for instance, to organize teaching colloquia or roundtables on which non-tenure-track and tenure-track faculty share perspectives and ideas. Graduate TAs could also be invited to present as a way of professionalizing them and planting the seeds of collegiality as part of their training. There are other low-stakes opportunities for

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<sup>7</sup> See Pelaez et al. (2018) for a discussion of collegiality as one of five essential elements for collaborating on a curricular improvement project for teaching biology to undergraduates. An important quality of the initiative's success was bringing together heterogeneous perspectives (for instance, involving research faculty and education specialists, from a wide array of institutions) and building community and shared commitment to propel the discussion.

departments to create a collegial culture: by inviting emeritus faculty, lecturers and students, as well as tenure-track faculty, to key events and department receptions; by holding open discussions of departmental issues over lunchtime or at breakfast while providing food (and being attentive to dietary restrictions and preferences).

The department head can also play a pivotal role by building a culture of recognition—which may in turn promote a collegial working environment. Shout-outs to faculty and staff are a first step—it is easy to announce appreciation for excellent faculty efforts (on committee projects as well as research and teaching efforts) or to staff who have gone above and beyond the call with assisting on a critical project by making these announcements publicly—at departmental meetings or via a departmental newsletter, for instance. (Let me add that, in order to be effective, the head needs to be even-handed and egalitarian in recognizing excellent efforts, so as not to give even the appearance of implicit bias or favoritism.) Offering a bonus to those who have been especially effective or nominating faculty and staff for on-campus awards are other meaningful ways to show appreciation. The amount does not necessarily need to be huge—even \$100 accompanied by words of praise recognizing someone’s contributions can build community and public recognition for people who serve the department’s common good.

To be sure, administrators play a key role in creating conditions for faculty members to interact as good colleagues: they have the ability to distribute resources equitably so that collegiality rather than competition can prevail; they can create opportunities for faculty to interact at work-related and social events; they can design and support opportunities for collaboration; and they can recognize outstanding faculty efforts of various kinds—teaching, research, and outstanding service contributions. Individual faculty members are also crucial for modelling and practicing inclusive collegiality and thus building a supportive network of relations. Faculty members who are willing to serve as allies—who have the courage and conviction to speak up for new ideas, for minoritarian positions, in support of their colleagues who occupy less-secure, less-privileged spaces in the academy—they are to be treasured. The goal, to invoke Bess’s schematic of collegiality once again, is for “b-collegiality behaviors” (or what he refers to as “altruistic or prosocial action”) to “emerge *out* of the . . . culture and *from* the structure of collegiality” (1992:24, emphasis added). In other words, we are all in this together; if we want to be members of collegial and inclusive units, we need to work with each other to create them. Advancing inclusive collegiality in the academy today requires both top-down and bottom-up strategies and efforts.

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