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Conflict, Academic Culture, and Transfer Success

One unusual theme that arises during conversations about the conditions associated with Community College of Philadelphia's (CCP) comparatively high transfer rate is that central to the academic culture in which that success takes place is conflict. Why that should be so—and the extent to which it is so—is the subject of this article.

Administrators and faculty alike usually try to avoid conflict, and so seeing conflict in any sense as a positive force within an academic culture takes some effort. But the lessons of CCP's institutional conflicts, detailed later, do indeed recommend that faculty and administration make good use of institutional conflict, and that they try to move such conflict in certain directions. This is playing with fire, to be sure, but there is no light without some heat. The heat of CCP's particular conflicts has several sources, each of which are main features of the college's academic history and culture. Briefly,

- CCP is a thoroughly urban college with only one main campus, and that in the center of a city filled

with colleges, universities, arts institutions, grassroots political organizations, and ethnic diversity, which together form an intense intellectual and political environment.

- The college's and the senior faculty's formative years —CCP opened its doors in 1965—were also the heady years of civil rights and antiwar struggles.
- The college has a strong union, which from its beginning has been willing to fight over academic issues, including a twelve-credit-hour-per-semester teaching load, a load which has given faculty the time to frequently revise their courses and to participate in a variety of discipline-wide and college-wide activities.
- More than in many community colleges, CCP has a predominantly liberal arts faculty rather than a technical and vocational one, tending to make liberal arts faculty members leaders of the academic culture, which in turn encourages an abiding interest in transfer education.
- For a variety of reasons, the college for most of its history has not had a consistently strong administrative academic leadership, and so the faculty, which has been a stable, long-term group, has often taken that leadership role for itself.

But to say that CCP's faculty, in particular, is a faculty that loves to fight is only half the truth. Yes, we love to fight, but we hate it too, and are not entirely happy about our reputation for contention. Indeed, tension between these two attitudes characterizes not only CCP's academic culture but also that culture's historical swings from conflict to retreat from conflict and back again.

And to say that CCP's sophisticated urban setting and eventful history prevent its academic culture from drifting into what has been variously called a "high school culture," a "remedial culture," and an "antiintellectual culture" would be an oversimplification. CCP, like all community colleges, is heir to that danger, both in reputation and in fact. So it is that the history of CCP's academic culture is also the history of a struggle between an educational orientation that looks backward towards giving the college's overwhelmingly nontraditional students "what they didn't get in high school" and one that looks ahead to providing students with some versions of the educational environments in which they will find themselves when they transfer to four-year colleges and to universities. Central to this struggle is the role of

conflict itself: is conflict the lifeblood of intellectual life in higher education? Or is it a problem to be overcome in the name of institutional harmony? Again, CCP is of two minds: we both love and hate conflict.

The Founding Conflict: A Faculty Strike Against the Academic Administration

In the late 1960's CCP's administration changed the college's academic structure, inserting a layer of middle management, division directors (eventually deans), between the department chairs and the top academic officer, the dean (soon to be provost, then vice president for academic affairs). Hearing of the proposed change, the faculty senate asked to be consulted, but its request was rejected. When faculty members in the new Humanities Division became particularly heated about this lack of consultation, the new division director invited the new provost to present to faculty in the division the administration's rationale for the reorganization. When asked by a faculty member at that meeting whether the faculty could persuade the administration to change so much as a comma in the new plan, the provost answered by turning to the blackboard where he had diagrammed the new organization, raising his voice, and pounding. The faculty responded by rising, walking out of the room, and signing union cards in the hallway. It was not long after that that the faculty voted overwhelmingly to become a local of the American Federation of Teachers, drew up a list of contract proposals that focused on faculty autonomy and other academic issues, and began collective bargaining. Soon CCP became famous for long strikes (an average of six weeks per strike) over broadly academic issues: basic faculty rights in 1970, the twelve-hour load in 1972, a contractual ratio between sections taught by full and part-time teachers in 1976, and inclusion of part-time teachers in the unionized faculty in 1981 and 1983. The cultural effects of these struggles are many, but most relevant to the question of the relations between conflict, the academic culture, and a better-than-average transfer rate are these:

- Faculty see conflict as a good thing in that it has produced significant improvements in their professional lives.
- Conflict over broad academic, professional, and curricular issues in particular has become a defining characteristic of this unionized faculty.

- The winning and maintenance of the twelve-credit-hour-per-semester load has given faculty the time to participate in curricular matters at every level: from the individual classroom, through course, discipline, and curriculum development, right up to the shape and direction of the College curriculum as a whole.
- The inclusion of part-time teachers in the unionized faculty (i.e., in a faculty whose basic professional rights and working conditions are protected by contract) has allowed significant numbers of them to actively participate in curricular deliberations at the course level, discipline level, and above, giving this group, which by contract agreement teaches up to 40% of the sections, a stake in the academic life of the college.
- Through these struggles the faculty has come to believe that it is only right and proper that the faculty, rather than the administration, take the lead in academic, professional, and curricular matters. "We are the College" is an assertion often heard from the faculty.

Likewise, the greatest danger perceived by many faculty is the illegitimate interference in classroom matters by the administration. "If we don't watch out, the administration will be telling us which textbooks we can use" was a sentiment heard often in the hallways, especially in the late 1960's, 1970's, and early 1980's.

A New President: CCP Faculty Learn to Fight Among Themselves

The locus of struggle and conflict changed after 1983, which saw CCP's last strike to date, the retirement of the college's founding president, and the arrival of Judith Eaton, who served as president until 1989. President Eaton set out to increase the faculty's and administration's institutional self-consciousness. Through a series of Presidential Forums, held in the wood-paneled CCP Board Room that had once been the Board Room of the United States Mint, Eaton brought to the college a series of lecture/discussions led by a variety of national figures, most, but not all, in education but all of them there to make more real the social, political, and educational environment within which CCP, so long focused on its own internal faculty-administration struggles, in fact lives.

Then, in a more intense focus on CCP itself, two major projects under Eaton focused faculty and administration on the implications of CCP's cur-

riculum for the success of its transfer students: the Ford Foundation-sponsored Transfer Opportunities Program and a school-wide attempt to reform the General Studies Curriculum. With these two projects, the faculty stopped fighting the administration and instead fought among themselves. The Transfer Opportunities Program, designed and administrated by professor of philosophy Martin Spear and professor of sociology Dennis McGrath, did not at first look like the kind of thing that would engender conflict. It proposed to create a pilot program, modeled in part on CCP's Honors Program, which Spear and McGrath had led for several years, and to involve a wide variety of faculty in two seminar series. In the first series faculty would talk through the implications of various proposed classroom practices for the success or failure of CCP's nontraditional students in their efforts not only to transfer but to succeed in school once they had done so. In the second series, Professional Growth Seminars focused on academic topics that cut across academic disciplines. These typically involved participants reading classic and contemporary texts and discussing them intensely during weekly two-hour sessions.

Both seminars produced some interesting and productive conflicts among the faculty, but especially the first, the summer seminars on faculty practices in transfer courses and programs. Typically, a small subgroup of participants in these seminars would circulate the text of a proposed writing assignment or examination question, and the other seminar participants would analyze it. What was it really asking students to do? That is, in just what kind of intellectual activity did the text at hand ask the student to engage? What picture of the academic world did the text suggest? What relations between faculty and student did the text establish? What relations among students? And in both the summer seminars and the Professional Growth Seminars, the hard questions did not stop there. Again and again, seminar participants found themselves asking each other, "What makes you think that? How are you thinking about the problem in general so that you make that particular comment?" In a community college academic culture long used to closing the classroom door and doing what you please, such questions created conflict. In response to the conflict, some faculty fled, and others found the experience the most exhilarating of their professional lives and were determined to repeat it. They soon had their chance in a setting much larger than the seminar room.

The General Studies Wars

President Eaton's second project for getting the college to be more conscious of its curricular direction was to ask the faculty for a proposal to revise the infamous general studies curriculum. Infamy came to this curriculum more or less by accident. Originally intended as a curriculum for the few students who might wish to tailor their course of study to fit external demands (e.g., transfer requirements for a particular college) not met by the College's regular curricula, general studies became a kind of default curriculum, the overwhelming "choice" of a huge majority of CCP's students. And many students within this curriculum were doing anything but tailoring their courses of study. Rather, they were drifting from course to course, usually avoiding the more challenging second-year courses, until they accumulated sixty credits, and—presto!—a CCP graduate in general studies.

What turned out to be the opening salvo in the general studies wars was a proposal written by transfer opportunities program leaders Spear and McGrath. Although not intended as an act of aggression, the proposal, which sketched a structural reform in which every course in the college would be classified by the faculty as belonging to one of a few intellectual agendas—such as the "expressive agenda" and the "interpretive agenda"—was greeted with howls of protest. Quickly, counterproposals from two rival groups of faculty formed to defeat the original Spear/McGrath proposal. What gave this conflict such sudden heat seem now to have been these elements:

The original proposal called for a major structural change, and as such, unsettled everyone.

It also proposed that faculty responsible for particular courses give those courses a rigorous examination, being very clear with themselves and with others as to exactly what sort of intellectual activity went on in those courses—again a far from comfortable prospect. What was done in individual classrooms was held by some faculty to be too personal, too "magical" to yield to mere analysis.

And from the point of view of some faculty, the very idea of structural reform raised the specter of the administration—or perhaps this time some elite group of faculty members—illegitimately interfering in classroom matters. "If we don't watch out, they will be telling us which textbooks to use" was heard in the hallways again.

Accustomed to conflicts over such broad academic issues as basic professional rights, the faculty and administration were not used to school-wide

discussions of complex curricular issues that reached down into the ways individual disciplines, departments, and courses were conducted. So it was that many faculty members and administrators, when characterizing this new kind of conflict, employed an old and familiar vocabulary: this must be a personal conflict, between individuals and groups of individuals—or at best a political or ideological conflict. In such a framework, ideas are seen merely as weapons for one side to gain advantage over another. In any case, the conflict soon came to an end, as the administration declared that there would be no school-wide structural change. Instead, the three groups of faculty (soon reduced to two) were to work out their personal differences and come up with a more modest plan for reforming the general studies curriculum. Most of the original combatants quickly dropped away, and the reform effort was reduced to small-group discussions of teaching methods and wishful thinking about what particular courses general studies students should be required to take.

But in the course of the general studies conflict, CCP's academic culture was forever changed. No longer was it legitimate for proposers of academic reform simply to describe what should be done. Rather, actual conditions and established practices now had to be taken into account. Moreover, there was a shift away from that peculiar idealism that constructs in the mind and on the page an ideal teaching/learning plan and then insists that everyone follow it, leaving no room for puzzling through the problem of how one gets faculty, staff, and students to change their ways of doing things. In other words, the faculty in particular—slowly, hesitantly, inconsistently, but obviously—was beginning to think institutionally.

Nor was it possible to say without being challenged that a particular clash of views was simply a personal dispute. Even truly personal disputes had now to be presented in terms of intellectual differences.

In general, conflict of ideas about the college and its curriculum began to be legitimized as a constructive public way of thinking through those ideas.

The “Dimensions”: A Second Attempt at Structural Reform

If Judith Eaton was the first CCP administrator to engage the entire college in a serious discussion of the curriculum, it fell to Phyllis DellaVecchia, academic vice president from 1991 to 1993, to bring CCP close to a major structural reform of the curriculum. DellaVecchia's efforts drew in part on McGrath and Spear's *The Academic Crisis of the Community College* (Al-

bany: SUNY Press, 1991), which was written during the period in which the general studies conflict sent most of its participants to the sidelines. But her efforts also drew on her own acute sense that two things were needed: an intellectually coherent plan for curricular reform and wide participation in planning and implementing the details of that reform. To achieve the first, DellaVecchia put together a faculty Task Force to Review Degree Requirements, drawn from a variety of academic disciplines—and from both sides of the general studies war. In almost a year of weekly discussions, the task force first decided not to reform the general studies curriculum but rather to drop it altogether. Then the task force proposed that the rest of the college's academic program be structurally reformed. This reform was to take place in good part by, first, having every course in the college certified according to seven categories (called "dimensions") already quite familiar to the faculty (e.g., reading, writing, scientific reasoning, quantitative reasoning). Second, every curriculum in the college was to reconstruct itself to require its students to take a certain mix of courses in those seven categories. One mix of the categories, heavy in scientific and quantitative reasoning, was designated for all Associate in Science curricula, another mix for Associate in Arts curricula, and a third for Associate in Applied Science curricula.

On the whole, the proposed reform was well received by many faculty, ignored by many, and vehemently opposed by a few. That opposition surfaced in the critical second stage of the reform effort, where wide faculty participation in the details and implementation of the new structure was mandated. The initial part of that wide faculty participation took the form of 63 faculty (nine for each of the seven dimensions) meeting as often as weekly for a year to work out the details of what would be required to certify courses in each of the dimensions. Although the opposition was not entirely coherent (demanding, for instance, both less structure and more detailed requirements for courses in particular dimensions), it was effective.

By the Spring of 1994 a new administration was being installed (both DellaVecchia and her immediate superior, President Ronald Temple, having accepted positions elsewhere) and was bewildered by the intensity of the conflict it inherited. Like many administrators and faculty before it, the new administration read the situation as one calling for peacemaking among personal antagonists rather than a problem of intellectual disagreement and curricular coherence. Thus the opponents of dimensional curricular reform were able to vitiate that reform (through a long series of "killer amendments")

without formally ending it. The result has been that few faculty have taken seriously the crucial final part of the reform, creation of new courses and curricula and thorough revision of the existing ones. Again the combatants withdrew to the sidelines, and again, as with the failed general studies project, the most serious loss was a sense of reality. The illusion of reform remains, but the reality has eluded us. So it is, for instance, that although students are now required to take mostly dimensionally accredited courses in order to graduate, barely 5% of CCP's 700 courses have been so accredited.

Conclusion: Learning from the Conflicts

As bleak as the lack of substantial results from CCP's two efforts to structurally reform its academic program are, the college's academic culture probably has gained from the conflicts those efforts entailed. Certainly we have learned some lessons.

Lesson One: The Big Plans Don't Work

In his *The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987), Stephen North provides a description of the life of composition teachers in college English departments that fits well the general academic culture of CCP, and, it would seem, many other community colleges. At the center of what he calls "practioner culture" is the individual teacher and her classroom, about which she has frequent informal conversations focused on the practical matters of how to handle particular students, classroom situations, and assignments. But questions about larger curricular structures are seen as alien to such a culture and seem also to threaten the autonomy of the individual teacher—especially if they involve conflict. So it is that structural reforms are perceived as a serious threat and, absent a dramatic cultural change, are doomed to failure. The first stage of such failure is the resistance practitioner culture offers to the proposed change; the second stage is the shunning of the conflict that such resistance helps engender; and the final result is the blurring of the distinctions that give meaning to the issues raised by the reform effort.

Lesson Two: The Big Plans Do Work

Thus the question becomes how the academic culture of community colleges might be changed to allow for serious intellectual disagreement and conflict to occur. The answer may well be getting the faculty to propose

exactly those big plans for structural change of the college curriculum. As CCP has learned, although the big changes are in fact unlikely to result from such efforts, along the way, some conditions for eventual change will be produced. That is:

- Faculty and administration alike build up some tolerance for disagreement and conflict—even as others decide always to flee from it.
- What counts as legitimate conflict begins to change, so that, for instance, not having a thoughtfully constructed framework for the changes one advocates or opposes quickly makes one's arguments marginal.
- Conflicts about what to do in any one area of the college are more and more often talked about in terms of the institution as a whole.
- In general, the academic culture is moved from one that looks backward to high school to one which looks ahead to some of the features of four-year college and university academic cultures, including the lifeblood of such cultures, intellectual disagreement.

Lesson Three: The Big Plans Might Work Someday, Somewhere

Transformation of the academic culture—whether a precondition or correlate of curricular reform and broad institutional success in transfer education—will not occur unless institutional conflict is carefully managed, a task that must fall to both faculty and administrators. In this regard, CCP's experience with such conflict suggests the following guidelines:

- Curricular change that does not seriously involve the faculty at every stage of deliberation and implementation will not succeed.
- Faculty will probably need to lead—and be seen to lead—from the very beginning of the process.
- Faculty leadership may well bring with it resentment from other faculty: “Who are they to tell me what to do?” Such resistance will likely have its roots in a general faculty belief in their individual autonomy: “Once I close my classroom door, it's none of your business.” Such belief needs to be handled with great care and strict honesty. On the one hand, no reform that does not eventually involve the willing participation of the groups of teachers who teach particular courses can succeed. And on the other, a reform that does not in fact reach into the

classrooms of most of a college's teachers will be a reform on paper only.

- Reform that tries to move teacher-by-teacher or section-by-section is doomed to incoherence and triviality. Somehow the work on structures large and small must be strongly related. Making good use of an institution's natural groupings is called for: departments, programs, disciplines, groups of faculty teaching the same course, and groups of faculty and administrators with common interests.

When the inevitable conflict arises from efforts to make structural changes in a college's curriculum, faculty and administrative leaders need to legitimize that conflict, to describe it in terms of—and indeed to help it to become in fact—a conflict of ideas.

One day such efforts may produce for the first time a community college that does much better than even the best are now doing at transforming non-traditional students into successful transfer students. That is, some day non-traditional community college students may be as successful in their junior, senior, graduate school, and professional years as are their traditional student peers. Meanwhile, the conflicts involved in the effort keep the hope alive.

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