

## Random Thoughts . . .

# DOES YOUR DEPARTMENT CULTURE SUIT YOU?

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If you are like most faculty members, your salary is paid by your university and you're subject to policies dictated by the Provost and Dean, but your department is your academic home. Cultures can vary dramatically from one department to another, and how much you look forward to coming to work every day can depend significantly on how well you are temperamentally suited to your department's culture. Just for the fun of it, fill out the questionnaire on the next page to gauge how you perceive that culture. For the questionnaire to be most useful, you should complete it before continuing to read. Go ahead—I'll wait.

\* \* \*

Finished? Look back at the bottom row. The more (a) answers you circled, the more your department can be characterized by words such as *collegial* and *supportive*; the more (b) answers, the more words like *individualistic* and *competitive* would apply. It's not that one type of department is good and the other is bad—they're just different. (I'm partial to collegial, but that's just me.)

Your comfort level at work depends on how compatible your personality is with the culture—collegial or individualistic—of your department. If you are strongly collegial, you'd probably be more comfortable in a collegial department than in an individualistic one; if you're strongly individualistic you might or might not be comfortable in a collegial department, but there is a good chance that your collegial colleagues would not be particularly comfortable with you. If either you or your department is somewhere near the balance point between collegial and individualistic, there's a reasonable chance that things will work out—and if they don't, it will likely be for reasons other than a culture incompatibility.

While I haven't attempted a rigorous validation of the questionnaire, to get a feeling for how it works I asked several of my friends on engineering faculties to complete it. Four of them in the same department—the department head, a full professor, an associate professor, and an assistant professor in his second year—respectively registered *a–b* scores of 14-3, 15-2, 14-3, and 15-2. In another department, the scores submitted by two professors (full and associate) were 12-5 and 9-8. Individual profiles from the other raters—all in different

departments—were 10-7, 11-6, 12-5, 12-5, and 0-17. In short, all but one department fell in a range from very collegial to fairly collegial, and that one showed up as virtually devoid of collegiality. I'm familiar with the departments in question and consider all of those ratings to be accurate.

If you are a department head and would like to increase your department's level of collegiality, have the faculty complete the questionnaire anonymously and use common (b) responses as prompts for change. If you see widely varying scores from different respondents, it could signal a problem such as the existence of cliques or the exclusion of women and minorities from full participation in department activities, and you should try to find out what's going on. If you are a faculty member, postdoctoral fellow, or graduate student looking for a new academic position, complete the questionnaire with your ideal department in mind before you go on your first interview trip. You should probably stop short of asking the search committee to fill out the questionnaire, but you might casually introduce some of the questions in your discussions with department faculty. The correspondence—or lack of it—between your responses and theirs could tell you a lot about how suitable the department is for you and vice versa.

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## Academic Department Culture Assessment<sup>f</sup>

For each of the 17 questions, circle the letter next to the description that most closely matches your perception of your department.

1	a		Research collaborations among department faculty members are common and fluid (the collaborators are different from one project to another).
		b	Intradepartmental research collaborations are uncommon. When they exist, they usually involve the same faculty members year after year.
2	a		Most graduate students identify themselves first as belonging to their department, second as members of their advisor's research group.
		b	Most graduate students identify themselves first as members of their advisor's research group, second as belonging to their department.
3	a		Informal interactions between senior faculty and junior faculty are common.
		b	Informal interactions between senior faculty and junior faculty rarely occur.
4	a		Laboratory space and equipment are often shared by students working for different advisors.
		b	Sharing space and equipment across research groups is rare.
5	a		Groups of faculty members frequently go out for lunch together.
		b	Groups of faculty members rarely go out for lunch together.
6	a		Individual faculty achievements and honors are routinely acknowledged and celebrated.
		b	Faculty achievements and honors usually go without notice within the department.
7	a		Faculty members and their partners/families periodically socialize with one another.
		b	Social interactions among faculty members and partners/families almost never occur.
8	a		New faculty are routinely mentored in research and teaching by senior colleagues.
		b	Mentoring of new faculty does not routinely occur.
9	a		The whole faculty gathers regularly for refreshments and conversation.
		b	Gatherings of the faculty for refreshments and conversation rarely occur.
10	a		Graduate students are frequently co-advised by two or more department faculty members.
		b	Co-advising of graduate students within the department rarely occurs.
11	a		Relationships among faculty members are almost always cordial and cooperative.
		b	Relationships between many faculty members are often distant or competitive.
12	a		The department's teaching program quality is a source of pride or concern to the faculty.
		b	The department's teaching program is seldom a topic of conversation among the faculty.
13	a		Dissertation defenses are almost always amicable.
		b	Dissertation defenses often include hostile questions from members of other research groups.
14	a		Graduate students generally choose research advisors after they begin their graduate studies.
		b	Graduate students commonly commit to advisors before their first semester.
15	a		Faculty meetings are generally peaceful.
		b	Faculty meetings are often contentious.
16	a		The Department Head provides performance feedback to new faculty annually or more often.
		b	The Department Head does not regularly provide performance feedback to new faculty.
17	a		Retired faculty members regularly participate in department activities.
		b	Retired faculty members rarely participate in department activities.
<b>Sum*</b>			

\*Add the number of circled a's and b's in their respective columns.

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