

Competing Tensions in Today's Academy

Changing Academic Work: Developing the Learning University

By Elaine Martin

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Reviewed by David L. Dollar

C*hanging Academic Work: Developing the Learning University* offers insight and guidance for all levels of academic staff who wish to make their working environments more satisfying and productive.

The author develops sound principles to guide academic work and provides engaging and convincing illustrations of these principles in action. Her aim is to help staff members build contemporary universities that are as much learning organizations as they are organizations about learning.

Ellen Martin is professor and head of the Curriculum and Academic Development Unit at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. She has worked and researched in the areas of tertiary teaching and academic staff development for twenty years, in both the UK and Australia.

Martin begins by highlighting the enormous changes higher education has experienced in recent years. With ever increasing student populations comes greater variety in backgrounds and prior educational experiences among students. This expanded generation of university students seeks educational opportunities that emphasize

future employment.

As contemporary university teachers have to attend to both the issues of increasing diversity among the student body and more vocational courses, they are also being asked to come up with more flexible ways of teaching.

Martin uses data from an international survey to show that academic staff members are overwhelmed with the enormity of the issues and challenges arising from these academic changes. When the major concerns of academic staff are considered in light of literature on student learning and learning organizations, four competing tensions in contemporary academic work emerge.

The first tension concerns vision and direction. Academic staff members in non-leadership positions believe that senior leaders show inadequate or inappropriate vision or direction for contemporary higher education.

Those in leadership positions, on the other hand, believe that there is a stubborn unwillingness on the part of non-leadership staff members to change.

The challenge lies in bringing the big picture, as seen by the university leaders, into line with the

day-to-day realities experienced by non-leadership participants.

The second major tension concerns consultation. Academic staff members in non-leadership positions feel that decisions are often made with little or no consultation or collaboration, while those in leadership positions argue that discussions with staff are often non-productive.

The art of working in contemporary universities involves developing the voices of many individuals into a complex, but harmonious, chorus. There has to be a balancing of individualism and collaboration.

Balancing accountability with reward represents a third tension. Staff members need to have a clear understanding of what they are being asked to do and how they will be rewarded. Those in non-leadership roles complain about the increased battery of accountability mechanisms, most of which they see as getting in the way of real work.

Leaders, on the other hand, talk about accountability as an imposition but appear less overwhelmed by it.

The challenge is to link the accountability mechanisms of the university with the avenues of personal recognition and reward offered in academics.

The final concern is that academic staff members believe what they do and what they have done for the organization is not valued. By far the most disturbing topic addressed in this book is the low state of morale among leaders and non-leaders in many universities.

Academic staff members express feelings of disempowerment, despair, and pressure

associated with unreasonable demands.

To help university staff members face change with confidence, attention has to be paid to what has been achieved in the past.

These four tensions, the author argues, have to be skillfully balanced if academic work is to become a more rewarding experience that results in worthwhile outcomes for universities.

Martin illustrates each of the described tensions through a series of case studies, and these illustrations strengthen the book. Additionally, the author substantiates her claims by drawing from relevant learning organization and student learning literature.

Martin concludes with the message that is a constant theme throughout the book: If academic staff members want better working lives, then they must help themselves. They cannot wait for great leaders or new environments to come and give them direction and support. They must take advantage of every opportunity to learn and grow.

Academic staff members must look to themselves and expect that their own contributions, combined with that of others, will be enough to make a difference.

To quote Ghandi: "We must be the change we wish to see in the world." ■

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