CONSULTATION AND COMMUNICATION

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John Millett has written that “two requirements are essential to the proper exercise of administrative authority: widespread consultation and effective communication” (1974, p. 25). It was his belief that presidents should listen carefully to the various groups making up the academic community and communicate with each about institutional problems and the administrative decisions made. As Millett uses the term consultation, it is an essential feature of effective communication and implies that presidents, deans, and department heads should never ask the advice of others unless their suggestions and viewpoints are given careful consideration.

Most administrators learn early in their careers that advice is given gladly, but good advice is difficult to obtain. New presidents must listen to the pomposities of many faculty members before they hear a word of advice worth taking. And most presidents must learn which faculty members have advice worth seeking and which faculty members must be pampered into thinking that their advice is being sought even though it cannot be taken. Access to the president’s office and audiences in high places do not mean that ideas and viewpoints are being communicated, and they certainly do not mean that consultation and effective communication are one and the same.

Consultative and communicative styles in academic administration are campus phenomena much in need of further study. Harold Lasswell (1960) has described communication as a matter of “Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?” Communication can be studied by concentrating on one or more components in Lasswell’s question. Some studies focus on “Who says what” to the exclusion of “To whom with what effect” and ignore altogether “Which channel” is used. Other studies of communication focus on the media or channel to the exclusion of who the communicator is, what the substance and content might be, and what can be observed. During campus crises, for example, some presidents have adopted a communicative style that might be called, “administration by press conference.” They appear before
cameras and microphones, speak with ease and authority, and trust that the least-damaging sixty seconds will be used on the evening news. What is said becomes secondary to the media and the manner in which the “channel” is being used. The “effect,” surprising enough, might be beneficial when judged from editorials in local newspapers or from cryptic headlines, such as “President Stands By Decision.”

CONSULTING WITH WHOM?

In higher education the “whom” is important but will often be unknown because they are so difficult to identify. News releases on new presidents and deans are seldom addressed to faculty and staff, and they are seldom read by readers not connected with the institution. Letters to the editors or “opinion pieces” in campus publications are an obvious way to communicate with colleagues but not a good way to consult them. The whom of the communication is more often assumed than specified. Trustees and informed public leaders may be the whom of some faculty “whats,” but the effectiveness of such communiqués is always in doubt.

In administrative decision making, presidents and deans must surely learn with whom they must consult. Every institution has constituencies and stakeholders in the institution’s future. All institutional programs and services have clientele and other users. The extent to which constituencies and clientele must be consulted is dependent, no doubt, on the decision being made and the expectations of others that they will be consulted. Consultative and communicative styles in handling crucial decisions may determine the manner in which the effectiveness of administrative decisions and administrators is judged. With whom to what effect may thus become more important in consultation than who does the consulting and what others are consulted about.

To consult more widely with their various clients and users, some campus agencies establish advisory boards that are representative of those who should be consulted. Institutes, centers, and other extradepartmental agencies are often under intense pressure to appoint advisory boards that can assemble for purposes of consultation and thereby permit “faculty input.” In efforts to give adequate representation to clients, users, faculty, students, and staff some advisory boards attain a size (and a diseconomy of assembly) that defeats the purposes of consultation and communication. Even when small and well-chosen, however, most advisory boards may serve primarily to lend prestige and credibility to agency programs and services.

WITH WHAT EFFECT?

If widespread consultation is crucial to effective communication, the latter is essential to the former. Thus the barriers to effective consultation and