Mining From the Middle: Making Resources Count at Work

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Instead of lowering the bar for faculty productivity when times are tough, increase it by stretching your resources. Long gone are the days when chairs could count on the funds needed to run their units, let alone grow them (Chu 2012). Show that your unit can deliver in good times and in bad and that it can remain strong for many years to come.

Make your resources count by imaginatively mining from the middle (Gmelch and Miskin 2011). Employ fiscally sound principles and proven tools to defeat static budgetary allocations and declines in support.

First, ask yourself:

- What type of work environment have I inherited and how can I improve it?
- How have I been enculturated to think about money and resources?
- What can I learn about being resource savvy, and what can I teach others?

Like politics and religion, money is a sensitive subject. Lacking open dialogue, leaders can inherit limited regulatory and reporting mindsets, and faculty can become exasperated with financial compression and lack of recognition. Based on a survey, department chairs also often feel poorly rewarded for the position's extra workload (Mullen 2009).

Avoid a stagnant work culture by embracing creativity, which allows for new ways of operating. An entrepreneurial approach makes the unit's mission more action oriented and fiscally driven. Chairs who lack fiscal artistry believe they cannot work beyond the assets and expenditures a budget prescribes. Insufficient training and looming audits reinforce this mindset. However, there are many ways to generate and spend income while still adhering to regulations.

Mining Challenges and Opportunities

Taking stock. Before you zoom in on the more ephemeral task of creating vision, investigate your budget, allocations, and expense history. Locate the financial documents that govern your decision-making purview, such as annual budgets, contracts, grants, endowments, regulatory policies, and faculty annual goal statements (Chu 2012). Many such documents include implied or explicit financial forecasts and expenditures.

Find out answers to such questions as:

- What is your operating budget in terms of overall dollars and line items, such as faculty travel, and what are your discretionary and nondiscretionary dollars?
- Do you have access to an overview of all income, assets, and liabilities for your unit and each faculty member?
- What elements are on the spreadsheet from your unit's most current budget, and what line items might be missing?
- What are your planned expenditures for the upcoming year, and what do these say about your priorities?

- Are there any endowment or unused funds that you can mine to build new initiatives?

The information may be tucked into binders marked with fund numbers or, if you're lucky, in organized, up-to-date spreadsheets. Your new best friend is your budget manager, as well as the college's budget manager. Have them educate you about the budget, allowable expenses, and nonreimbursable expenditures, in addition to regulations, fiduciary audits, and lessons learned from previous audits. Ask hard questions for which policies may not exist or may not be exacting. Create your own policies that guide allowable creative risks for fostering faculty development and unit growth. Prepare a calendar with dates of budgets due to each office.

Budgets do not exist in a vacuum, so find out how your budget aligns with those that are managed at a distance (e.g., dean's office). You will have greater or lesser responsibility for managing personnel costs that include hiring new faculty and staff and allocating student assistantship stipends and other expenditures. Compare notes with other chairs. Interview the university's finance officer to fill in gaps about your campus's priorities and challenges.

Improving Performance and Operational Effectiveness

Motivating faculty and encouraging productivity have overarching importance, but allocating the same amount to everyone for professional development and/or travel each year may not offer the best return on the preciously few dollars available. Thinking entrepreneurially, it may be more beneficial (and supportive) to give tenure-and-promotion seeking faculty a higher allocation and, in doing so, invest in the unit's success.

An equity-minded fiscal approach necessitates risk, negotiation, communication, transparency, and a majority consensus. Allocate funds by making judgments and forecasting faculty productivity by examining annual goals and past performance. Hold in-depth individual annual planning sessions in which faculty have documented their work, linked their activities to the departmental mission and goals as well as major priorities, and listed the costs associated with all activities. Discuss how external funds may be secured. Move the faculty from drafts to better accounting statements; use all of the faculty worksheets to plan more accurately.

Unit policies generate robust conversation and embed values. Do your faculty really believe that all types of work and effort are equally valued and that nonparticipating faculty are permitted to buy books or office ornaments? When you let them dialogue, you may find that they advocate for quality benchmarks and expect high performance. Faculty performance varies considerably. In some cases, all faculty are strong but in different ways. In other cases, the range is from strong to weak with respect to agreed-upon benchmarks of performance. For example, some faculty give keynotes or multiple presentations at conferences or conduct highly valued work nationally or overseas. They make every buck count. Some may do a regional presentation or none at all yet attend conferences or extend these with a holiday. Reinvest the monies saved from faculty who are not satisfying the benchmarks to help offset expenditures.

Negotiate funds from the dean's office, specialized centers, and other entities. For more student support, try the graduate school, student associations, and professional organizations. Nominate faculty and students alike for awards and opportunities; use the department's goals as a guideline. Awardees bring in distinction (academic capital). Publicize progress updates and results in-house. Create a newsletter or periodical that can carry a subscription fee. Facebook and student-run blogs tap prospective students and track their interests. Use prominent media outlets to communicate your key messages and outstanding accomplishments, and keep supporters and investors in the loop.

Managing risk and exposure. Interpersonal dealings involve risk management, as does external grant writing and contractual work with partners. Annual reports allow unfunded grants to count as productivity; incentivize such risk by revising faculty workloads. Model the expected behaviors involving grant writing, presenting, researching, and publicity and incorporate faculty and students into mutually beneficial work.

Consider investing in internal sabbaticals and expect financial returns. High-performing faculty can bank time by teaching overloads. Grants that build on seed monies and address top national priorities attract attention. Teamwork and interdisciplinary grants are valued, thus funding can follow from accomplishments (e.g., publications, awards) and faculty successes. Negotiate a percentage of the indirect returns from the unit's grants and contracts.

Complying with regulations. Regulatory and reporting requirements govern decision making. Monitor discretionary funds to determine what is allowable, such as the purchase of food and gifts for retirement and other events.

Every unit undergoes audits (some also accreditation), whether they are fiscally focused or more comprehensive or campus initiated or external to the university. If you create a self-study context for your stakeholders, you will surely have an easier time of it. Auditors look for consistency with policy, as well as original paperwork and signatures (e.g., on staff leave forms). Have your ducks in a row. Seek out a spot check prior to the audit to remedy issues in advance. Hold informative meetings to change attitudes from defensive to proactive.

Investing in your culture. Faculty professional development is a high priority: "Your most important resource is faculty" (Chu 2012, 64). I concur with Crookston (2012) that the building of a positive faculty culture goes beyond vision building to include covenant building. Enduring promises of collegiality and civility are core beliefs that are consensually articulated and lived (Mullen 2010).

Once priorities are concrete, analyze current needs and new opportunities. Landline phones and other outdated technologies are being phased out to save money. In addition, revenue streams—contracts, grants, executive programs, endowments, and conferences—continue over time (Chu 2012). Regular faculty who teach winter session (December–January) or in between regular semesters can earn thousands, and their unit may receive thousands for every course taught. One idea is to strategically reward the faculty member's home program (or unit), which recognizes an entire group. Or start an executive program that requires capital layout to succeed. Another idea is that faculty who are graduating, advising, or supervising students, or enabling their job placement, can be rewarded with stipends. Reinvest in your unit and explain what you did and why.

Avoid scrambling to spend excess or unused funds. Consult the department statements you have created that cover faculty priorities for spending and recognition for excellence. Another valued use of funds tends to be institutional professional memberships, which increase faculty visibility and a university's stature. Faculty can be engaged in the decision making by prioritizing a list of potential associations and voting on which ones to join. Also negotiate holding onto dollars when underenrolled courses during summer and winter sessions are canceled and have a plan for their use. This can prove lucrative. When faculty are not around, such as on holidays, financial policies allow for decisive action.

Cultivating relationships with potential donors is a long-term endeavor requiring vision and patience. Create an advisory board of influential alumni and hold well-planned meetings and incorporate celebration. When donors give to a university, they are prompted to specify the designation, and many opt for a general unit. Work with your assigned development officer to have the donations appear in your budget.

Study endowments from donors and turn these into themed initiatives, such as individually awarded scholarly grants devoted to a particular cause housed within your unit or a consortium. Bring the awardees together to share their plans—and excitement!—with the donors present over a celebratory meal. Publicize the event.

Conclusion

As a boundary spanner, you have the leverage to brainstorm new opportunities that benefit your unit. Invest in your ongoing training and development to yield even better results.

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