

Faculty Reopening Committee: A Study of Chair and Faculty Collaboration

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In March 2020 universities across the United States pivoted to remote teaching in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For many universities, the decision for this instructional transition was made quickly and with little preparation. For many academic leaders, including department heads, the summer of 2020 was largely spent planning how to reopen the university for students in the fall for face-to-face or hybrid instruction. As a department head from a large performing arts unit (music, theatre, and dance disciplines) in a Research 1, public university, I collaborated with a self-selected group of volunteer faculty to form an Ad Hoc Reopening Committee. In this paper, I share the dynamics of this particular committee and how it exemplifies the relationship between a department chair and faculty colleagues.

Origin and Makeup of the Faculty Committee

While the pandemic was a concern for all disciplines, performing arts activities, such as singing, instrument playing, dancing, and acting, were identified early in the pandemic as potential “super spreaders” (Hamner et al., 2020; Read, 2020). Although I reviewed guidelines from the CDC and university central administration, it was important to examine at how the guidelines did or did not apply specifically to performing arts activities.

In our unit there are only seven 12-month employees: myself, three staff members, an academic advisor, and two music faculty. At our last faculty meeting in May, prior to the end of 9-month faculty contracts, I outlined the many decisions that the university still needed to make regarding fall reopening and my goal of keeping abreast of the research for the virus and its impact on the performing arts. Because of the variety of activities and the large amount of research to consider, there was a need to form a faculty committee of representatives across our three performing arts programs (music, theatre, and dance) to prepare for the opening of the fall

semester. I was reluctant, however, to ask faculty to invest the necessary time off contract after many of them had experienced one of the most difficult semesters of their careers.

Perhaps they were reading my mind during this meeting as several faculty asked during this last faculty meeting to form a reopening committee. I responded about how helpful this would be to ensure that I received input from faculty of all of our programs, but I expressed my reticence to ask them to volunteer for what would be an involved and time-consuming task. A faculty member expressed appreciation for my concern but was willing to invest the time during the summer. So that faculty would not feel pressured from their department head, this faculty member agreed to coordinate and organize volunteers to serve on the committee. Once volunteers were in place, the committee decided to meet weekly with a rotating facilitator who was charged with setting the meeting agenda and making sure that time was used wisely. While I thought that it was important to share authority with the committee in this task, it did require me to examine my role and my collegial relationship with the committee in order to effectively complete the necessary tasks to reopen school.

Role of the Committee and the Department Head

Committee Members

One of the first challenges of the committee was to determine the scope of the work, assign areas of responsibility, and for faculty to self-select the role they would play within the committee. Although the university did not finalize a decision about learning modalities (i.e., remote, in-person, or a hybrid of the two) until mid-June, they had provided scenarios for what instruction and other university activities would look like depending upon the pandemic “response phases” that the university, county, and state were under. Most importantly, however, the Provost had established priorities that would guide decision making in response to the

pandemic. These priorities provided much-needed direction and support for me and the committee, as it established the foundation for our decisions and implementation of those decisions.

Prior to the creation of the committee, I had already begun making adjustments to our fall course schedule, such as changing classrooms and meeting times and reducing enrollment capacities. At the first meeting of what came to be called the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance Ad Hoc Fall 2020 Reopening Committee, we first had to define how performing arts could be effectively taught in a variety of reopening scenarios and determine the tasks necessary to enact those scenarios. Determining the scope of tasks necessary to reopen our unit for fall classes was a moving target as new studies, webinars, and health guidelines were released on what seemed like a weekly basis. Not only would it be impossible for one person to have the time to engage in all of these materials, but much of it was discipline specific and would best be engaged by experts in those areas. As the department head, I am a music faculty member and, while I certainly have knowledge of theatre and dance, faculty in those areas were better equipped to engage with research and guidelines specific to those disciplines. To learn from each other, faculty would volunteer to attend a webinar or read a research study and report back to the group.

As members of the committee shared the research and guidelines with the group, they began to consider the amount of time and effort they were willing to invest in their specific area. One faculty member wrote me privately that they had not thought that the work of the committee would be so time consuming and was unsure whether they wanted to continue to engage. As I was sensitive to the voluntary nature of faculty involvement, I responded that I understood and appreciated any amount of time and effort that they could offer, particularly since they were from

a sub-discipline that needed representation on our committee. After this reassurance, they continued to be a valuable member of our committee.

Although faculty continued to review research and attend various webinars from performing arts professional organizations, the faculty volunteered to serve as chairs for different areas of our preparation: facility and supply preparation (including transit maps, PPE, and cleaning supplies); social distancing and masking guidelines; course scheduling; live and virtual performance; and communication to faculty, students, and stakeholders. At weekly committee meetings, chairs shared their progress and received feedback and recruited assistance from fellow committee members.

Department Head

As I mentioned above, I had already begun some of the preliminary work for our fall reopening, beginning with managing the course schedule to accommodate social distancing measures. Additionally, I had written an emergency continuity plan in early March, shortly before our transition to remote teaching at the request of the Provost's Office. Although I was grateful for the faculty volunteering to do this important work, I had to reexamine my role as the department head to ensure that the work was completed. This required me to shift my role identity from one who had to complete the majority of planning and implementation with a small staff to one that would best support the committee. Thus, I began to see my role shift to that of middle manager, facilitator, and implementer of policy.

As a middle manager, I was charged with communicating the goals and policies of the university administration to our faculty committee and ensuring that committee decisions were in compliance with university policy. Additionally, I had to communicate to the Dean, Provost, and Registrar how our unit was implementing university policies within our facilities, classes, and

performances. Because of the scope of adjusting the schedule (our unit has nearly 500 sections in a given semester), implementing transit maps, and communicating to our faculty, students, and stakeholders, we created an internal planning deadline about a month before classes were scheduled to begin. By this point, the university had decided to open in a hybrid model where faculty and students could choose the instructional modality of the course; however, there were a number of university-level decisions that remained outstanding largely due to concerns over ventilation in aging buildings and the disbursement of PPE supplies and development of cleaning protocols. In my role as middle manager, I found myself trying to predict university policy that had not been stated and communicate to the committee the need to be flexible not only if these predictions proved to be inaccurate, but also because we could quickly return to all-remote teaching if there were infection spikes in the region.

In addition to serving as a middle manager, I also saw the importance of serving as the facilitator to support the role of the faculty member whose turn it was to facilitate the meeting. The role of facilitator is one of the most difficult as a department head. It is vital to hear from all perspectives in order to arrive at the best decision. Besides having more willing hands to complete the necessary work of our reopening, the committee was necessary so that it could represent the diverse needs of the many programs that we have in our unit. There comes a point, however, when deliberations need to end and decisions need to be made and implemented. As a department head, it is important, particularly early in the process, to listen more and speak less. While some faculty may have no concerns about expressing their view (even if it differs from the department head), other faculty may be reticent to express their view if it differs from the stated view of the department head. The department head, therefore, should refrain from sharing their view early in the process. Not only does this approach allow for a freer discussion of ideas, but it

also allows the department head to challenge a majority view or express the perceived view of others that may not be represented at the table to ensure that all angles of an issue are explored. When the faculty committee could not agree on a course of action, however, they often looked to me to break the tie or in some cases to justify my reasoning for not implementing their solution. In other words, the department head's best strategy is to utilize the collective wisdom and experience of their colleagues to make the best decision. In many cases, however, that decision solely falls on the department head and the department head must be prepared to communicate the rationale to faculty who both agree and disagree with the decision.

While the committee was discussing policy and guidelines for the reopening of school, I had to be cognizant, that as department head, it would largely fall on me to implement the policy and hold members of our community accountable in following that policy, especially when students or faculty disagreed with it. It was important, therefore, to not only consider the rationale for committee decisions but to also anticipate possible objections. Although the committee had varying levels of agreement on decisions, consensus was built through committee discussions for which our entire faculty and students did not directly engage, making clear, frequent, and varied communications vital to garnering support from the entire community. In our performing arts unit, the issue of safely conducting live performance was a tremendously difficult issue.

Researchers varied greatly in their characterization of the risks and guidance to mitigate risks in performing arts activities. They largely agreed that singing was a "super-spreader" activity in its emission of aerosols, but the recommendations varied from no group singing to masked singing to outdoor singing. Industrious merchants developed wind instrument bell covers and specially designed masks for singers (protruding away from the mouth) or actors (clear so

that you could see the wearer's face). In the middle of the summer, there was inconclusive research on the safety efficacy of these solutions or the effect of factors such as room ventilation and social distancing parameters in a performing arts activity. While the music industry/discipline invested in research studies, the dance industry/discipline offered little research in comparison, although it was not lost on the members of the committee that college football was still being planned.

Although the committee was committed to the safety of our faculty, staff, and students, there was a large concern from committee members and other faculty that a cessation of performing arts activities could have a negative impact on recruitment and enrollment as prospective students considered the prospects of attending performing arts school when their participation in performing arts activities was limited. The faculty questioned whether students would wait the pandemic out by attending community college or taking a gap year. In the midst of a nationwide higher education enrollment and funding crisis and the closure of the performing arts industry across the country, faculty feared the long-term implications of university divestment from the performing arts leading to the loss of faculty positions as was seen at a number of institutions even before the pandemic.

This dissonance between the need to keep our faculty, staff, and students safe, while trying to maintain some semblance of our activities to ensure that students would enroll, was debated by the committee in the summer and pushed back by faculty once school began in the fall. I began receiving emails from faculty of sharing first- and second-hand accounts of their colleagues not following our pandemic policies. This put me, as the department head, in a difficult situation to ensure policy compliance without damaging faculty collegiality and morale. If not handled delicately, the situation could quickly dissolve in faculty blaming their colleagues

if they or our students became infected. I handled this through one-on-one conversations with the faculty who had been accused of not complying with policy regarding the situation and the concerns of compliance. In all but two cases, the response was an apology of not requiring their students to follow the policy. In both of the other cases, the faculty members questioned the need for the inhibitive nature of the measures in their ability to teach effectively.

Lessons Learned

Our faculty-led reopening committee is an excellent example of the importance of faculty governance and the varying roles that a department head must play in working with faculty colleagues. Through this experience with the faculty reopening committee, a number of leadership principles can be generalized to many different higher education tasks and decisions.

Be a good, empathetic listener.

Most faculty have an expectation that academic leaders are good listeners; but it is a complex skill because it is about not just saying less and listening more, it is also about hearing verbal and non-verbal communication and having the appropriate empathy for the speaker. This is true in both individual and group discussions. An important step in discussing any issue is to make sure that all the “right people” are in the room. When department heads are creating a committee or inviting people to join a discussion, they should consider:

- Are people well-versed on the topic in the room? This does not mean that everyone on the committee has to be well-versed on the topic (part of your job or the job of the committee chair is to provide appropriate background and context for an issue), but engaging people who have thought about or are invested in the issue is vital to coming to the right decision.

- Are the people in the discussion a wide enough representation of the areas/programs that will be affected by potential decisions that result from the discussion? We often think about faculty committees, but there are many times when we should engage a wider spectrum of stakeholders, including, students, staff, alumni, and university administration to fully explore an issue.
- Although it is important to have committee members who represent their colleagues from a certain area/program, are the people in the discussion able to think broadly beyond their respective program? If all members of the committee are solely focused on their own program, the conversation will quickly turn to a “turf defense,” rather than finding solutions that will help the most members of the community.

In listening, a department head must facilitate an atmosphere where all people in the discussion are comfortable expressing their perspectives. This form of active listening requires the department head or committee chair to be aware of what is said, how it is said, and what is not said. The conversation facilitator needs to guide the conversation so that one or two participants don't dominate the conversation and proactively ask committee members to share their thoughts. Department heads also need to allow members of the committee to express their views/ideas before offering one's own views/ideas. Nothing can end a conversation quicker than when the academic leader expresses their view of the “best course of action,” particularly from committee members, such as non-tenured faculty, students, or staff, that may be intimidated or concerned about consequences of disagreeing with the head. The department head needs to thoughtfully consider alternative views that may not be considered by the committee and even

appear to advocate contrarian views, not because that is the view of the department head, but because the group needs to explore a variety of pathways in their discussions.

Consider the diverse needs of students in all decisions.

As academic leaders we must always consider the diverse needs of our students in all of our decisions. As the work of our reopening committee occurred in the summer, there was no student voice on our committee, so communicating and updating our students on our deliberations was vital. This communication began with a short brochure that highlighted our reopening policies and was followed by a Zoom town hall that consisted of an overview of the policies followed by student questions. Although I led the town hall, all members of the reopening committee were present and I was pleased when those members responded to questions, especially in those areas where they had led the work.

Anticipating student concerns and their needs, especially in the hybrid in-person and remote teaching modality that we were planning, was constantly at the center of the committee's deliberations. In the performing arts, we have many opportunities to build student support communities through ensembles, productions, and studios. These communities help us develop support mechanisms for students. Finding how to do this when many performance classes moved to largely remote learning was a challenge and the committee, in addition to our academic advisor, was integral in helping faculty build those communities.

Understand university processes and resources.

The response to the pandemic is an example of the middle manager role that department heads often play. Department heads have to invest time in learning the priorities and processes of central administration to align unit-level decisions. In the case of my university, two priorities communicated by the Provost were the health of our faculty, students, and staff and the financial

health of the institution. Based on these priorities, faculty could select the delivery method of their coursework (online, in-person, or a hybrid of the two). In every meeting or email with faculty, I communicated these priorities as a means to bolster faculty morale in a time of great concern for their own health and the uncertainty of the airflow safety of our facilities.

Communicating university processes was also important with faculty who felt that guidelines restricting live performance were inappropriate and potentially harmful to our ability to recruit and retain students. It allowed me to be empathetic to their concerns but also stress the need to follow university protocols.

In all times, including the pandemic, the department head also needs to provide the resources to help their colleagues be successful. While some of these resources are internal to the unit, the department head who is aware of opportunities across the university can best connect faculty with those resources. While we often think of fiscal support, the department head also needs to be aware of training and material support. During the pandemic, this included the process for acquiring PPE and cleaning supplies, classroom cameras and microphones for remote teaching, and funds for equipment needed for students, such as microphones for students, musical instruments since students could not share, and dance squares so that students could participate in online dance classes from their dorm room or apartment. With the help of the committee, we also found resources for faculty to support them in their online teaching, including means to build community and assess progress in remote situations.

Build consensus.

Building consensus informally and formally through conversations is the key to discerning the best pathway. Investing in the time and effort to have necessary conversations will lead to the best decision. Without this investment, decisions may be myopic and lead to

unintended negative consequences. By having the conversations as I have suggested above, academic leaders will have the opportunity to discover unintended consequences and thoughtfully consider the pros and cons of the decision.

Additionally, investing in building consensus leads to more buy-in from faculty. In most organizations, but especially in higher education, cooperation is always more productive than compliance. If faculty members are asked to follow guidelines or participate in a task that they feel like they had a voice in creating, they will be more invested and will work to see it get accomplished. This level of cooperation will be greatly diminished if a faculty member is completing a task because they are being forced to or as a means to implement the “great idea” of the academic leader.

Make timely decisions.

As important as discussing and building consensus with stakeholders is, ultimately decisions have to be made in a timely fashion. While the decision may be based on the work of multiple people, in many cases the responsibility of the decision falls solely on one person, usually the academic leader. Thus, the department head will be held accountable, both by the Dean and Provost on the one hand, and department faculty on the other (even if members of the faculty were a part of the discussions). In the case of our reopening committee, the deadline for our decision had to be made a month before classes began so that we could implement the decision. Unfortunately, we were still missing data and university decisions when this date came and I had to push the “go” button and hope, based on what we knew, that it would be the right decision when the data came in.

In implementing that decision, you have to determine how to delegate and facilitate with faculty and staff. While, as the department head, you cannot do everything, you have to lead by

example. With less than a month before classes began, we had yet to receive any word from university facilities what support, if any, we would receive to prepare our facilities for in-person instruction with social distance guidelines that had yet been finalized due to ventilation studies. In addition to removing desks and chairs, we had to move our piano lab to an entirely different space so that we could have 13 rather than 4 students in each section. This move, which allowed us to offer 8 rather than 25 sections, required a replacement of computer with piano workstations and some DIY rewiring by our Associate Director. I communicated to the faculty what needed to be done, when I was going to be doing it, and asked for volunteers to join me. I was overwhelmed with the outpouring of support for a job, which I expected to take two weeks, taking less than one. Not everyone could do heavy lifting (it took me a few days to recover afterwards), but our faculty was happy to do what they could (all with masks and as much social distancing as moving furniture and hanging signs would allow!).

Another important aspect of making decisions is being transparent in clearly communicating the decision and the reasons for that decision, and being humble and flexible if a better idea comes along or the situation changes. Two weeks before classes began, there were still a number of important details that had not been finalized by the committee. Many of these were unintended consequences or details of previous decisions, such as what is the appropriate length of “air refresh” time for a room depending upon the size and occupancy of the room and the kind of performing arts activity that had occurred. By this time, we had received ventilation data for our rooms with capacities for lecture activities but not for activities that produced the kinds of aerosols of the performing arts.

Because of the number and complexity of these decisions, there was not the time for the committee to consider all of them before the start of classes. I was going to have to make the

decisions and build consensus as time allowed. Because we did not have the appropriate ventilation data and there were inconsistent guidelines for the variety of performing arts activities, I created an addendum to the committee's published recommendations, which I solely drafted and asked for feedback from the committee. These decisions were based on the Provost's priority of the health of our faculty, staff, and students, so I was aware that these guidelines may have been overly cautious to the inhibition of some activities. After feedback from the committee, I released the addendum to faculty, students, and college administration with the disclaimer that these recommendations erred to the cautious side and all of our guidelines would be examined throughout the semester as we learned more about the disease and monitored infection rates and other metrics in our region. If there had been more time, we would have discussed these matters more, but that is not always possible and academic leaders must be prepared to have to make those difficult decisions and face the possible criticisms that they may bring.

Final Thoughts

As Department Heads, we have the greatest resource in making good decisions: our faculty, staff, students, and university administration. We don't have to have all the answers, but we do have to be able to manage the people and resources at our disposal to discover the best pathway forward, and the humility and flexibility to change course when necessary. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we are doing our work in higher education. Some of these changes will fall away as vaccines are distributed, but there are some things that will stay with us, such as renewed emphasis on virtual instructional tools and guidelines for the health of people in large gatherings. I am confident that whatever our situation is on the other side of this

pandemic, Department Heads, as leaders within their unit, will continue to play a pivotal role in working with their faculty colleagues and college and university leaders.

References

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