Class Issues
Outside the Classroom

By Anonymous

Why is this article anonymous? Because staff members don’t have the same protections you have.

They call it rankism. It’s an apt term to describe the class relations between university staff members and their faculty “colleagues.” When a senior administrator heard that staff were complaining about rankism, he added “staff relations” to the agenda of his monthly meeting with department chairs. At the meeting, he proclaimed his shock that such a word as “rankism” would even be used. It was one of those familiar Casablanca moments—“I’m shocked, shocked, Rick, that there’s gambling going on.” When the administrator proposed calling in an outside consultant to work on sensitivity training with faculty, someone suggested that he and faculty members might instead attend a meeting called by staff to listen to their concerns. He responded with baffled silence.

To explore the issue of staff-faculty relationships, Academe asked a senior professor, long sympathetic to the need for a working-class perspective in the academy, to write an article for the magazine. From the start, it was clear to her that the article could not be honestly written without staff voices and perspectives. The collaborative (and, necessarily, anonymous) writing that follows stems from meetings between a salaried senior staff member, an hourly staff assistant, and the listening professor.

The two staff members were enthusiastic about the project, especially as the first staff meeting of the 2005–06 academic year had ended with an impromptu, heated, and tense discussion about rankism on campus. Over the next few months, the faculty member and the two staff members talked several times. In some of the discussions, the three explored their own individual experiences at the university; in others, they tried to figure out how best to proceed with the project and to integrate multiple staff voices.

In order to privilege the views of staff, we divided these conversations into four parts. The first three sections were written by each of the three primary participants. The fourth is a summary of a discussion at a staff meeting in which staff members were told about the article and given the opportunity to contribute thoughts and experiences.

A Senior Staff Member

As a senior staff member in a high-level, salaried position, I would like to share my thoughts about staff-faculty relationships. I find these relationships to be very strained or nonexistent because of efforts by faculty members and administrators to control staff or “keep them in their place.” I am happy to say that there are exceptions, too.

Over the twenty-plus years that I have worked in academia, I have experienced a lack of respect from faculty members and administrators, many of whom have made demeaning, belittling, condescending remarks and behaved rudely as they have exerted their superiority. There is gender bias, unfair treatment, subjective evaluation, accusations, threats, and bullying, in an effort to get what they want. I find some administrators and faculty members, especially those with tenure, to exhibit arrogant, self-centered, and immature behavior in their display of self-importance. Such abuse of power is totally destructive and unacceptable in today’s world.

Working in this environment creates chaos, low morale, confusion, conflict, anger, depression, and feelings of powerlessness,
Notes from a Staff Meeting

This past April, the three of us prepared a short document titled “Valuing Staff” for distribution at a monthly staff meeting. The document read:

Do you see yourself as working in a democratic environment? Are you treated in an equally respectful manner as others? Do you feel that you are working in a class or rank system?

We are putting together an article for a national journal about the relationship of staff to faculty and administrators. As part of that process, we invite you to tell your experiences and stories of work relationships. All responses will be anonymous, as will the identity of the university, meeting that was taking place later that day. He said he wanted to address faculty-staff relations.

His announcement was a surprise. Although the dean had stated in remarks to faculty and staff at the beginning of the academic year that he wanted to address staff-faculty relations, he had said nothing further about the issue in the eight months that followed. We believe his sudden renewed concern was the result of someone from the staff council giving him a copy of our “Valuing Staff” document. The dean, at the chairs’ meeting, explained that some staff members were concerned about how they were being treated and that a human resources specialist would be meeting with departments individually for sensitivity training.

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Our goals include the following: (a) to expand awareness of people’s working relationships and recognize the work they actually do; (b) to offer an opportunity for people to voice their views in a national and local context; and (c) to foster a democratic work environment.

This is an agenda item for the staff meeting on Thursday, April 13, 2006. No administrator or faculty member will be present, and your comments will be kept anonymous. We welcome your participation.

Not long before the meeting, something strange happened. The dean sent an e-mail message to all the department chairs, adding an urgent, last-minute item to the agenda for a chairs’ meeting that was taking place later that day. He said he wanted to address faculty-staff relations.

A week after the chairs’ meeting, the dean presided over the beginning of the staff meeting, as usual. After updating staff about various matters, he explained, as he had to the chairs, that a human resources specialist would be meeting with departments for sensitivity training. Then he left the room.

After the dean left, the staff began to talk about staff-faculty relations, working from “Valuing Staff,” which had been circulated beforehand. The discussion started slowly. Some staff members said they were reluctant to participate. Others worried that the anonymity of the university and the individuals might be compromised.

Many staff members seemed preoccupied with a new policy, which had just been announced, requiring hourly employees (the category into which most staff fall) to “punch in” and “punch out” with greater accuracy and regularity. In essence, staff were being asked to record the hours they actually worked as opposed to the hours they were scheduled to work (that is, to record 8:00 instead of 8:00 if they arrived four minutes late one morning). One staff member even started crying because she was so upset about the new policy. Someone else said punching in and punching out in such a way was “demeaning.”

Another staff member said that reporting time was not the real issue and that the discussion should be refocused.

Compared with the staff discussion at the beginning of the academic year, which had happened naturally and was, in many ways, the impetus for this project and this article, the April discussion lacked spontaneity, vigor, and passion. People seemed tired. They seemed hesitant to participate. So many of the experiences, anecdotes, and stories that had been shared at the prior meeting or in hushed hallway discussions afterward were now being withheld. What had changed between then and now?

Just as the momentum of the conversation picked up a little, a faculty member unexpectedly entered the space—called the Faculty Commons, even though it is used equally by faculty and staff—where the meeting was being held. He wanted to use the coffee machine. He gave an apologetic sort of smile, indicating that he hadn’t realized a meeting was in progress. Even so, he didn’t turn around and leave right away. He still got his coffee. The machine hummed while his coffee brewed. No one spoke for the minute or two that he was in the room. Immediately after he left, a staff member said, “See, that’s a perfect example. A staff member would never walk into the commons during a faculty or chairs meeting. Can you imagine what would happen if we did?”
Despite the overall awkwardness of the discussion, a couple of themes ultimately emerged. One had to do with communication, the other with tenure. Staff felt that there was a lack of communication between and among staff, faculty, and administrators. Staff believed that, in many cases, faculty didn’t realize when staff members felt as if they were treated disrespectfully. A few staff members noted that after the dean mentioned the problem at the chairs’ meeting, their chairs approached them to ask what the chairs might do to affect the culture of the college.

One staff member pointed out that faculty and staff members never meet together. The monthly staff meetings and faculty meetings are held separately. Upper management relies on the staff council to communicate the needs of the staff, but the staff council doesn’t adequately represent the opinions of the full staff. Staff also agreed that faculty members often don’t seem to understand the work staff members do or the responsibilities associated with staff jobs. One staff member said that faculty always think that when they have spring break, staff also do. Faculty don’t recognize that staff do not get the same breaks as faculty.

Staff complained that supervisors often don’t fully communicate their priorities, explain the reasons behind particular tasks, or take time to answer questions about the work they want done. This failure affects staff’s ability to complete tasks effectively. One staff member said, “Communication doesn’t flow from the top like it should.” Staff are often the last to know about a change in policy or procedure.

Another common theme that arose in the discussion is the relationship between tenure status and behavior. Some staff described older faculty and tenured faculty as more likely to behave disrespectfully toward staff than younger faculty or untenured faculty.

“Older faculty are from a different era,” one staff member said. “It is not that way anymore.” A senior staff member said she had noticed the way faculty members’ attitudes changed as soon as they were granted tenure. “Once they get tenure, they cross over the line. Younger faculty don’t have job security, so they have to worry more.”

The discussion ended with staff offering several specific recommendations for improving staff-faculty relations:

• The tone has to be set from the top, by deans and chairs.
• There should be real punitive consequences for faculty who behave badly and follow through on those consequences, regardless of whether a faculty member is tenured or not.
• There should be clear communication about how faculty are expected to act toward staff. A set of guidelines should be created and distributed to all faculty members and should be included for new faculty as part of their orientation.
• Staff should have the same access to administrators as faculty have. Staff should be invited to breakfasts and other events hosted by the president and dean; currently, only faculty are invited.
• The university should approve a staff ombudsperson (staff currently do not have one).

We’ve learned from our conversations about staff-faculty relationships that it is unrealistic to expect that a sensitivity trainer or a few meetings will transform an inherently hierarchical institutional system. But these conversations have yielded fair-minded guidelines for cooperative work relationships. Staff ask for recognition, respect, and mechanisms, such as a staff ombudsperson, to address problems as they occur. Faculty need to know that there are repercussions for mouthing off to staff. It is not enough just to round up the usual suspects.
helplessness, and worthlessness. The atmosphere promotes poor performance, negative attitudes, absenteeism, and high employee turnover. The unfortunate behavior permeates our personal, professional, and public lives. It also spreads beyond the college and has affected the reputation of professors and higher education.

Staff members who have taken a stand against the unfairness, or who have repeatedly spoken out, no longer work here. There is a genuine fear of retribution, that is, losing one's job, receiving an unfair evaluation, or other ever-so-subtle penalties. If staff feel this way, what about our students? How does the abuse of power affect their learning process?

I was impressed by the state of the office. I knew she had been fired. I did not expect to find the files in immaculate order, but they were. No random papers on the credenza, no neglected tasks. If I had been given less than a day to clear out my office, it would not have been so neat.

My predecessor left behind few personal items. On the bookshelf outside her office was a line of stuffed animals. Later, I would learn that the department chair had bought them for her as a gift for her children, but she never took them home. I had heard that she and the chair didn't get along. It is widely believed among staff members (correctly or incorrectly) that their lack of rapport was the reason—the sole reason—she was fired. Someone warned me.

ended up in an English department, because I happen to have an MFA in creative writing, a fact I was slow to reveal at work. (At all my other office jobs—I have had many—I have always been in the closet about being a writer. It seems irrelevant to the work I have been hired to do, and I prefer to keep my lives separate.)

My experience as department secretary, I suspect, has been different from my predecessor’s. I have had passionate conversations with faculty about writing and literature. They respect me as a writer. They have been encouraging and supportive of my writing. I now count several of them among my close friends.

I am valued as a person, on a personal and individual level—I know this. But I sometimes wonder if the work itself is valued. The chair (the one who fired my predecessor and who has since left her position) told me many times that this job is “beneath” me. I know she meant it as a compliment. She meant to say that I am valued beyond the clerical tasks I perform. However, the word bothers me: beneath.

Other faculty members have told me they feel sheepish about asking me to make photocopies for them or to post signs on doors when they have to cancel classes—requests they should not feel uncomfortable about, considering the tasks are included in my job description. Someone said, “We think of you as one of us.” The implication seems to be that the tasks themselves are somehow demeaning. There is a hint of elitism behind the comments—that some kinds of work are more valuable or more important than other kinds of work.

When the dean interviewed me for the permanent position, a couple of months after I had been working as a temp, he asked me, “Don't you want something more?” More? I walked away from my meeting with...
him feeling like he thought the position was "less."

After two-and-a-half years, I am leaving my job. I will try not to leave any personal items behind, but I'm sure there are items I will forget; I won't be able to erase completely the marks of my presence. I'll forget to delete a short story from the computer. Or I'll forget my postcard tacked to the bulletin board, the one of military students with buzz cuts and uniforms, sitting in class, reading Howel.

I have decided to leave behind the button—Dignity Is Non-negotiable—in the desk drawer, where it has been all this time. I never needed it, but my successor might.

**Tenured Faculty Member**

We exist in a mutually dependent but unequal relationship. Despite the rhetoric of a college's "academic family," the reality is that we function within defined categories of rank. But those categories do not necessarily have to shape human relationships.

As the interim chair of the largest department in my college, I am in the dubious position of "managing" the staff assistant, a concept alien to my working-class sensibilities. I take certain elements of our relationship as given: the office cannot function without a staff assistant who moves the business of the department along by monitoring the budget, calling meetings, organizing applicant files for new tenure-track positions, or listening to the numerous needs of the faculty members who drift into my office. I like to see my role as good shop steward rather than boss.

All work deserves respect. When the custodian knocks on my door to empty my wastebaskets, I pick them up and bring them to her. My doing so does not represent an overly anal-lyzed theoretical position. I just assume that it would mean one fewer physical exertion in her day. It is a natural gesture.

The class problems inherent in the rankism of staff-faculty relations manifest themselves in two ways: individual and structural. Individual faculty members, enmeshed with their own titles, can and do treat staff as underlings and servants. They demand, are impatient, and see themselves as the center of the universe. In my department, this behavior is mostly atypical. The assumed class differences are more muted and subtle. Professors may casually and unself-consciously comment on how someone who is "only" a secretary could be so intelligent and engaging. In general, I'd like to think that over-

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faculty classism toward staff will erode, especially as the proletarianization of the profession (graduate school unions, temporary full-time Lecturer positions, and adjunct employment) becomes more pervasive. When overt oppressive and disrespectful behavior does occur, administrators have a duty to address it in such a manner that the faculty member knows there will be repercussions if it continues. But in some ways, the problem exceeds the authority of an administrator. Like sexism or racism, rankism has to be owned by everyone.

The structural problem is more complex. We exist in a double reality without a double consciousness. On one hand, we have the rhetoric of family; on the other, we know that we are in a hierarchical system that perceives those at the bottom as very distant relatives. There are certain advantages to a staff position in a university or college—access to good retirement and health benefits; low or no tuition for children; and a clean, quiet, and relatively safe working environment. Unsurprisingly, a recent job search for a new staff assistant yielded about a hundred applicants. The successful candidate has two degrees and significant experience. Despite the low salary offer, she eagerly accepted the job. Perhaps it will lead to other positions and a rewarding career trajectory. However, the element of upward mobility or "the next step" is more murky for staff than for faculty, for whom the steps to promotion are typically spelled out. The difference is a subtle aspect of this doubleness; more deeply, it suggests a condition that makes staff insiders and outsiders at the same time. They are beholden to their superiors in ways few tenure faculty experience. They are part of the operating system of a college, but they are aware that they can be disposed of and replaced. (Actually, replacing good staff is not so easy!) The system might work better if the differences between staff and faculty were clarified so that each group could recognize how their separate, mutually dependent roles contribute to the education of students. Recognizing different roles is not the same as oppressive rankism. The former implies reciprocal respect, the latter hierarchical treatment. Respect for and recognition of staff must be viewed as normative.