

Why We Can't Just Get Along

John P. Frazee

As director of faculty relations at the University of Colorado at Boulder, I think a lot about faculty politics. Lately, I've been mulling Henry Kissinger's famous remark that "University politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small." Why does it ring so true?

The very characteristics that make higher education an extraordinary environment in which to spend our professional lives also contribute to the likelihood that politics -- or, to use my preferred term, conflicts -- will arise more frequently, run deeper, and persist longer than in other walks of life. Those conflicts don't have to be vicious, but given who we are and what we do, they may very well be unavoidable. In what follows -- and acknowledging that I'm making generalizations to which there are many exceptions -- I want to suggest why.

Consider, first of all, the nature of the men and women who are drawn to the profession. Obviously, college professors are smart and extraordinarily well-educated people.

Less obvious is the fact that, by some reckonings, a majority of college professors are introverts, as the term is used in the well-known Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. At the risk of oversimplifying the distinction, while "extraverts" (as the term is spelled in the MBTI) engage the outer world and other people, introverts are more likely to prefer being alone, engaging the inner world of principles and ideas. The absent-minded professor, lost in thought and ill at ease in social situations, is the comic reflection of this common academic personality type.

The fact that introverts are in the majority among college professors is noteworthy because introverts are a distinct minority in the general population. The disproportionately high percentage of introverts in academe makes sense, given the work we do. A preference for thinking about ideas and principles (coupled, of course, with high intelligence) is an undeniable asset in the pursuit of high-quality research and teaching.

At the same time, though, the highly intelligent introvert is not necessarily wired to play well with others. Working as a member of a group, it's the extravert who shines, who is energized by the opportunity to engage with others, think out loud, and put ideas out there for others to consider. The introvert, on the other hand, suffers in group settings, taxed by having to interact, preferring to think through a problem before speaking up, and perhaps irritated by what he or she perceives as the shallowness of the extraverts in the group, who tend to do most of the talking.

Out of their comfort zone in group settings, introverts may withdraw physically or psychologically or, stressed to the breaking point, may engage in inappropriate outbursts. Little wonder that many faculty members detest department meetings.

If many college professors, by nature, deal poorly with conflict, the way they are nurtured -- i.e., the habits of mind honed in the course of earning a doctorate -- is tailor-made to create conflict.

One of the essential intellectual skills developed during graduate training is to make inferences about the object of study, abstracting patterns, meaning, and significance from data, and then subjecting those inferences to rigorous testing.

In human relationships, making and testing inferences all too often gives way to the much-less-useful habit of making (untested) assumptions about other people's meaning, motives, and even character. Unless modulated by highly developed listening skills -- rarely included in the graduate curriculum -- the inference-making habit of mind is more likely to impede than promote good communication and mutual understanding.

While mastering the content of their disciplines, doctoral students are also trained in the art of intellectual combat. They learn to look for and point out flaws in the data or reasoning of others -- and to respond effectively to similar sorties directed at their own work. The dialectic process is inherently conflict-oriented, and properly so: Subjecting one's ideas to the cut-and-thrust scrutiny by others is essential to establishing their value. (If my martial metaphors seem overdone, recall that the culminating event in the Ph.D. program is the dissertation defense.)

Skill in disputation is vital to success in academe, but it can be problematic when deployed in personal interactions. Behavior that may be brilliant in academic debate is more likely to create ill will when directed toward friends and colleagues.

Making the transition from student to professor, the newly minted Ph.D. enters an institutional culture that, by focusing unrelentingly on the individual, only enhances the likelihood of conflict. Except for the time spent with students or in the occasional (dreaded) meeting, the work of a typical college professor is mostly solitary.

In my discipline, English, as in the humanities generally, collaborative work in either teaching or research is rare. Even in the sciences and social sciences, where Ph.D.'s often work in groups and report results in multi-authored publications, research responsibilities are typically divided -- or hierarchically distributed -- among individuals who take on parts of the process independently.

Regardless of how the work is structured, the academic reward system unequivocally emphasizes the individual. Professors seek tenure and promotion based on their individual accomplishments as teachers and scholars. So strong is the bias toward individual achievement that collaborative work is often evaluated with considerable skepticism.

With the path to tenure and promotion only one person wide, there's very little incentive to work on developing, let alone using, interpersonal or group-process skills.

The individualistic nature of the profession is further reinforced by faculty members' employment relationship to their institutions. I've never met a professor who didn't bristle at the notion of being considered, in any sense, an "employee" who works for a "boss." In fact, little about a faculty member's relationship to the university would make him or her think otherwise. Faculty members don't punch a time clock, submit vacation requests, or track sick leave.

Faculty members typically come and go as they please, teach what they want, and engage in research and other professional activities based on their own personal interests. Ceding only limited authority to their chairs and deans (who are not their bosses), professors are essentially free agents.

Their free agency is a by-product of two of the most distinctive attributes of the profession, tenure and academic freedom. Short of a felony conviction or a finding of research misconduct, gross incompetence, or moral turpitude, a tenured faculty member generally has little to fear from the university. The vast majority of faculty members understand that academic freedom and tenure confer great responsibility as well as great privilege, and they conduct themselves accordingly. But fear of treading on academic freedom and tenure does make it far more difficult to deal with the small number of professors who treat those cornerstones of academic life as a license to behave with little regard for civility or collegiality.

Finally, all of the conflict-enhancing effects of intelligence, personality, training, institutional structure, and culture are compounded by the fact that higher education offers much less mobility than the private sector.

Employees in the private sector change companies and even careers multiple times in the course of their working lives. If you know that you'll stay with a company for only a few years, your personal stake in the issues affecting the organization is likely to be smaller. If management's decisions -- or your co-workers -- aren't to your liking, you can move on.

In contrast, college faculty members often spend most if not all of their careers at a single institution, where they interact with other faculty members similarly circumstanced.

Prolonged proximity can itself be a source of conflict. When two people are colleagues for decades, even small interpersonal issues are likely to loom larger. As the years pass, slights, disagreements, and misunderstandings can accumulate. I suspect that most colleges can point to at least a couple of senior faculty members whose relationship resembles a long but troubled marriage, with every point of incompatibility and every disagreement remembered and frequently revisited.

Viewed from the worldly perspective of a former secretary of state, the stakes in higher education may well appear small. But for faculty members who don't want to move on -- and especially for those who can't -- the stakes can be very high indeed. If your career and professional identity are inextricably bound up with the fortunes of your department,

college, and university, every issue, from personnel decisions and curriculum changes to office assignments and parking, is potentially a high-stakes issue.

With so many factors contributing to its incidence, depth, and duration, conflict may be an unavoidable fact of academic life. But that conclusion need not imply resignation -- still less, pessimism -- about the state of the professoriate. For its part, the University of Colorado at Boulder saw instead an opportunity to deepen its already considerable investment in its most valuable resource, the faculty.

In creating the position I now hold, the university committed to a focused and sustained effort to help faculty members and administrators address and resolve conflicts more quickly and effectively. If my work can free up even a fraction of the time and emotional energy that unproductive conflict consumes, the faculty members whose work defines the character of the university will enjoy both increased productivity and increased satisfaction with their working lives. That's an investment well worth making -- and a reason for optimism.

John P. Frazee is director of faculty relations in the Office of Faculty Affairs at the University of Colorado at Boulder.