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Local Cultures in Institutional Contexts: The Functions of Academic Departments in Liberal Arts Colleges

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Abstract

The academic department remains understudied as a context of faculty work, particularly in institutional settings beyond the research university. In this article, we report findings from a study of faculty experiences within academic departments in liberal arts colleges, through analysis of interviews with 55 faculty members representing a 13-member consortium of liberal arts institutions in the mid-western U.S. Through inductive analysis and deductive coding from existing models, we identified five functions of departments in liberal arts colleges, including: (a) faculty hiring, retention, and promotion; (b) new faculty socialization; (c) informal interactions, mentoring, and network-building; (d) establishing and communicating institutional and departmental policies, practices, and procedures; and (e) the structuring of academic work. Findings suggest that departmental functions in liberal arts colleges are generally the same as those in other institution types, but play out differently and thus have different consequences for academic careers. Across functions, liberal arts colleges seem to be undergoing an evolution, or perhaps revolution, that has implications for academic work in such contexts.

Keywords: liberal arts colleges, academic departments, faculty careers, professoriate

Introduction

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Liberal arts colleges (LACs) are experiencing challenges individually and as an institutional sector (Anderson & Svrluga, 2015; Breneman, 1990; Rivard, 2013). Many of the core components of the liberal arts experience are delivered by their faculties, in contexts increasingly characterized by high teaching loads, limited support or administrative personnel resources, strong demands for faculty-student interaction and invest-

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ment in the campus community, and changing demands related to scholarly productivity and visibility (Baker, Baldwin, & Makker, 2012; Baker, Pifer, & Lunsford, 2016).

The academic department is the location of both institutional and disciplinary culture (Becher & Trowler, 2008; Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2000), and also has its own distinct culture (Austin, 1996; Clark, 1984; Gappa, Austin, & Trice, 2007; Hermanowicz, 2005; Lee, 2004). Departmental characteristics such as size, diversity, and culture affect faculty experiences and productivity related to teamwork, collegueship, and organizational environments (Fox & Mohapatra, 2007). As such, it is an important context within which to situate and explore academic work in LACs.

There is not much research about the work of the professoriate as it occurs within liberal arts colleges (LACs). It is clear, however, that faculty work in LACs is distinctly different from such work in research-intensive universities, and emphasizes a unique combination of tasks, skills, and expectations of faculty time and productivity (Baker et al., 2012). Faculty members at LACs are not trained for their careers in the same contexts within which they enact those careers (Austin, 2002; Golde & Dore, 2001). Faculty roles in LACs include not only research, teaching, and service obligations, but also tasks often performed by nonacademic staff in larger institutions, such as academic advising, fundraising, and program administration (Reder, 2010). Academic administration and governance also take shape differently in LACs, where faculty members typically have more engagement in and control of decision-making at the individual and local levels (Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013). Thus, faculty members in LACs must serve two masters – their institutions and their disciplines. The primary context for both roles is the academic department.

Little research has documented the ways in which faculty members are supported and developed within the contexts of their institutions to best engage in their work. LACs are smaller in student enrollment, resources, and faculty numbers than their peers, such as community colleges and research universities, but still complex organizations with multifaceted missions. Within them, there is likely to be both a strong need for faculty collaboration at local levels for student-centered tasks such as teaching, as well as a strong sense of local control for issues of administration and management. Reder (2010) offered that local cultures are particularly important in LACs.

Among these local contexts, none may be more important in shaping faculty work and outcomes than the academic department. Few scholars, however, have given attention to the role of the department in this regard, particularly in recent inquiry. Lee's (2004, 2007) work is one exception. Through analysis of national survey data from faculty members, she discovered that institutions may have stronger effects on departmental culture than disciplines. Lee called for further inquiry into how institutional type and characteristics influence academic departments. Another is Ponjuan, Conley, and Trower's (2011) investigation of pretenure faculty members' relationships with senior departmental colleagues, in which they, too, suggested additional research about departmental contexts from diverse perspectives.

Although scholars have identified the academic department as a critical context of academic work (Duryea, 2000; Gappa et al., 2007; Hearn & Anderson, 2002; Lee, 2004, 2007; Pifer & Baker, 2013), we know of no studies that have explored the departmental context of faculty careers specifically within LACs. The aim of this study was to better understand that component of LACs, and more precisely, the functions it serves in faculty work in LACs.

Through our prior research, we documented the challenges and opportunities that exist for faculty members within academic departments through a consortium study of LACs. Analysis of survey and interview data pointed to the perceived importance of departmental colleagues, cultures, and leadership in both supporting and hindering faculty satisfaction and success (Pifer, 2015). To extend that analysis and build on that knowledge, we sought to understand the functions that academic departments fulfill for academics' work and careers in LACs. That aim guided the investi-

gation presented here. The research question for this study was, “*What functions do academic departments serve in faculty work within liberal arts colleges?*”

Review of the Literature

We first provide an overview of the academic department as it has been described in the scholarly literature and applied to research about academic organizations and careers. We then summarize existing conceptualizations of the functions of academic departments. Together, these areas of scholarship inform our decisions to explore the functions of academic departments in LACs.

Researching the Academic Department

Academic departments are the foundational organizational unit of colleges and universities (Hearn, 2007; Peterson, 1970, 1976), in which “curricula, degree programs, grading practices, and research initiatives, as well as faculty norms, values, and careers, are shaped” (Hearn, 2007, p. 222). Departments are sources of faculty support, knowledge generation and dissemination, and collaboration, facilitated through regular interactions with peers and the shared work of the unit (Dahlander & McFarland, 2013; Hearn, 2007; Kezar, 2013; Patariaia, Margaryan, Falconer, Littlejohn, & Falconer, 2014; Pifer & Baker, 2013).

Scholars have explored several areas of academic work through the lens of the department. Much of the research about academic departments was generated in the early era of descriptive analysis of postsecondary organizations, and considered their usefulness related to the discipline, the institution, or the profession (Conrad & Blackburn, 1985; Keith, 1999; Peterson, 1976). Conrad and Blackburn (1985) provided insights into methods for evaluating departmental quality at regional colleges and universities, emphasizing the role of institutional context in shaping not only faculty work but also others’ perceptions of departmental quality. Keith (1999), too, pointed to the importance of institutional context in understanding academic departments.

Braxton (1991) studied the roles of departmental quality and leadership in shaping and transmitting norms and expectations for scientific conduct within the profession. Rhodes (2007) directed attention towards the local exercise of academics’ collective power such as “campus-based channels of influence” in understanding the academic profession, of which the academic department is one type (p. 123). Other scholars have examined how departments influence norms and behaviors among faculty members (Peterson, 1976). Lee (2004) studied the ways in which institutional and disciplinary cultures shape departmental culture. In their consideration of the faculty career, Schuster and Finkelstein (2006) focused on departments infrequently; their consideration addressed the trend of increasing responsibilities for departmental administration and service among academics over time, particularly among senior faculty members.

Others have also considered the academic department as a context for understanding faculty members’ experiences and related outcomes (Keith, 1999). Callister (2006) investigated the relationship between departmental climate and job satisfaction and intent to quit. She reported a strong effect of perceived departmental climate on both measures, and particularly among female faculty members. Baird (1986, 2009) was interested in departmental research productivity and reputation, and found that the highest-ranking departments in terms of reputational prestige were not necessarily more productive than those that were lower ranked. McCain, O’Reilly, and Pfeffer (1983) considered the effects of faculty cohorts on departmental turnover, and found that department size, faculty members’ years of service, and individual characteristics were significantly related to turnover. Hearn and Anderson (2002) explored the sources of departmental conflict over promotion and tenure decisions, and found that both departmental characteristics and the individual characteristics of their members are likely to influence members’ votes for their colleagues’ promotion and tenure cases. Golde (2005) extended this perspective by considering the

role of the department in doctoral students' experiences and found that departments are both the manifestations of disciplinary cultures and also their own distinct influences on doctoral students' learning, socialization, and experiences – including ways that contribute to a perceived lack of fit and student attrition.

Kezar (2013) explored the role of departmental policies and practices in non-tenure track faculty members' teaching performance, as a way of considering faculty members' working conditions. She identified both positive and negative ways in which such policies and practices did, in fact, shape participants' work. Kezar (2013) documented how the lack of supportive policies can be tracked to poor work performance and thus negative effects on student learning experiences. She advocated beyond the use of departmental policies to support faculty work, and instead for informed decisions about which policies are best for supporting that work.

The academic department is an important context of academic work (Duryea, 2000; Hearn & Anderson, 2002), but not one that has been thoroughly studied by those who are interested in understanding the professoriate, colleges and universities as organizations, or the faculty experience across and within diverse institutional settings. Early organizational scholars most often focused on the institutional level of analysis when considering academic management and the academic profession. Consideration of departments related to the individual rather than the organization tends to offer it as an accepted socializing location of academic and disciplinary work, rather than consideration of the functions of the department in supporting or hindering academic work.

Andersen (1977) wrote, “no administrative unit within the college or university has been so important, misunderstood, and maligned as the academic department” (p. 1). Thirty years later, Gumpert (2007a) reflected on the effects of the changing nature of academic work and organizations on academic departments and subsequently the emergence of “a new host of practical problems that lend themselves to study” (pp. 42-43). Research about academic departments has not systematically considered the functions they serve within faculty careers or within specific institution types. We know of no studies of academic departments within LACs.

Conceptualizing the Functions of the Academic Department

Within the body of knowledge about academic departments, there is a small but notable stream of writing that has taken on the task of conceptualizing the functions of academic departments. Particularly in its early years as a site of organizational analysis, various scholars offered their views of the purposes of academic departments. Here, we summarize those contributions and describe how they serve as a launching point for our study.

Biglan's (1973) benchmark study of subject areas was, importantly, situated within the organization of academic departments, but applications of that knowledge tend to use a disciplinary lens, rather than a departmental lens. Hearn (2007) wrote that “the interconnections in the sociological work on departments are enough to frustrate any aspiring typologist” (p. 223). Based on his review of the literature, he identified six areas of inquiry about academic departments: (1) the structure of academic work; (2) competition, conflict, and change within departments; (3) resource dependencies and power relations; (4) disciplinary differences; (5) compositional patterns; and (6) contexts for student development and socialization (Hearn, 2007).

Andersen (1977) defined the academic department as “a community of teachers and scholars responsible for instruction and research within a specialized field of knowledge, and thus as the basic administrative unit of the institution” (p. 9). Drawing from historical analysis and then-contemporary practice, Andersen outlined five benefits of academic departments: (a) a location of the development, preservation, and transmission of knowledge; (b) a location of familiarity and authority for situating interactions within and among students and instructors; (c) a source of professional knowledge for new faculty members; (d) a way of organizing and representing individ-

ual faculty members within the institution; and (e) a system for the peer evaluation of faculty members.

Trow (1977) identified the functions of departments as: (a) graduate education; (b) recruitment and promotion of faculty members; (c) research; (d) and undergraduate education. Austin (1996) pointed to the ways in which students, faculty, physical space and resources, history, and situated nature within the larger institution influence departmental culture. She categorized sources of influence within the department as: (a) reward systems; (b) leadership; (c) conversations and networks; and (d) policies and practices.

O'Meara et al. (2014) were interested in the ways that departmental contexts shape student agency. They reported five such ways, including: (a) encouraging career paths; (b) providing opportunities for skill development, (c) providing financial and other resources; (d) facilitating networking; and (e) providing mentoring and guidance. Although their attention was on graduate students rather than faculty members, O'Meara and colleagues offered a contribution towards understanding the functions of departments that may be relevant for the consideration of such functions as they pertain to academic careers beyond the graduate student stage.

Others have provided more general, rather than typological, descriptions of the roles that academic departments play in faculty work. Bechhofer and Barnhart (1999) found that departmental contexts shape the experiences of new faculty members. They cited collegiality, support, good colleagues, participatory decision-making, task-related feedback, and departmental leadership as being important in new faculty retention. More recently, Gappa, Austin, and Trice (2007) pointed to the importance of departmental structures, cultures, sizes, resources, communication patterns, rewards systems, and policy implementation practices as some of the features that shape academic departments as distinct working environments within colleges and universities.

Taken together, those models suggested eight functions of academic departments, without consideration of institution type and perhaps assuming that the research university was the typical context. These eight functions include: (a) leadership and structuring of academic work; (b) location of disciplinary work and research; (c) serving a collective representative function within the larger institution; (d) student learning, development, and socialization; (e) resource allocation; (f) new faculty socialization; (g) faculty hiring, retention, and promotion; and (h) informal interactions, mentoring, competition, and network-building. Table 1 summarizes the functions of academic departments as conceptualized across the scholarly literature.

Table 1: Prior Conceptualizations of Departmental Functions

	Hearn (2007)	Ander- son (1977)	Trow (1977)	Austin (1996)	O'Meara et al. (2014)	Bechhofer & Barnhart (1999)	Gappa et al. (2007)
Leadership & structuring of academic work	X			X		X	X
Location of disciplinary work & research	X	X	X		X		
Institutional representation		X		X			X
Student learning, development, & socialization	X	X	X		X		
Resource allocation	X				X		X
New faculty socialization		X				X	
Faculty hiring, retention, & promotion		X	X	X			X
Informal interactions & network-building				X	X	X	X

Scholars have conceptualized and explored academic departments in various ways, but there remain gaps in this area of inquiry. Academic writing about the structure and functions of departments as they influence faculty work and experiences, in most cases, seems to have been based on the professional knowledge of the authors rather than primary research. As noted, this line of research has excluded the context of LACs. In addition, it seems that most research about academic departments from an organizational perspective has not been rooted in faculty experiences in and perceptions of these important suborganizational contexts.

In our prior research, we explored how faculty members rely on departmental colleagues in their work and career development (Baker et al., 2016; Pifer & Baker, 2013; Pifer, Baker, & Lunsford, 2015). Our research, as well as the contributions of scholars before us, however, has yet to produce a research-based typology of the functions of the department related to academic work in LACs. Further analysis of the functions of departments would be helpful in extending this line of scholarly writing and testing some of the frameworks that have been offered, both in general and within specific institutional contexts. Given the paucity of research about academic work in LACs, research studies about the role of academic departments in faculty members' work and careers in those contexts would be particularly useful. Such knowledge would contribute to a more current and refined understanding of the structural and cultural realities of academic work in LACs, and thus related strategies for supporting that sector of the professoriate.

Methods

In light of the changing nature of LACs and the absence of research about faculty experiences in such contexts, the Initiative for Faculty Development in Liberal Arts Colleges explored faculty careers and experiences within the member institutions of a consortium of LACs in the mid-western US. The broad aims of that project were to document and understand all facets of faculty work, experiences, and needs within such institutions, and to compare those experiences with administrative and institutional responses, programming, and investments (see Baker et al., 2016 for details). For this analysis, we explored data from interview transcripts with 55 faculty members from across those LACs to identify the functions that academic departments served in faculty work within those contexts.

Research Sites and Sample

We obtained IRB approval to collect data from all 13 member institutions of the consortium. Of the 840 faculty members who completed the survey that was part of the larger project from which this analysis is drawn, 111 indicated a willingness to be contacted for the interview; 55 faculty members from 11 LACs ultimately participated in the interviews. Kenyon College did not participate in the survey; rather we relied on their Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) survey data where it aligned with our survey, which prevented access to interview participants from that site. Antioch College recently reorganized and does not have academic departments; thus, interviews from that site were excluded from this analysis. Because generalizability is not the goal of this qualitative study, we were more interested in learning from as many faculty members as would share their individual experiences with us, rather than a significant number of the faculty members working in these institutions. Talking with these 55 people from a range of ranks, disciplines, and institutions provides a richness of data. Among the participants, 29 (53%) were female and 26 (47%) were male. There were 32 full professors (58%), 15 associate professors (27%), and 8 (15%) assistant professors in the sample. Table 2 provides an overview of participant by institution and field of study.

Table 2: Participant Overview by Institution and Field of Study

	Number of Participants	Humanities	Social Sciences	STEM
Albion College	4	1	1	2
Allegheny College	4	0	2	2
Denison University	6	3	3	0
DePauw University	5	2	2	1
Earlham College	2	0	1	1
Hope College	8	1	3	4
Kalamazoo College	5	0	4	1
Oberlin College	6	2	0	4
Ohio Wesleyan University	3	0	1	2
Wabash College	4	2	1	1
College of Wooster	8	1	4	3
<i>Total:</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>16</i>

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in person and over the phone, and audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We relied on a semi-structured interview protocol to both allow the guiding concepts to direct data collection and to capture unanticipated responses and comments from participants (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Patton, 2015). The interview protocol mirrored the themes explored through the faculty survey. The protocol included nine questions with prompts about their roles and time allocation within their institutional work, sources of support, factors that influenced their success and satisfaction, and perceptions of institutional efforts to socialize and retain faculty. The interviews provided rich, descriptive data about participants' experiences, which was often situated in the contexts of their academic departments. Their responses thus provided us with a complex set of data related to the functions those departments fulfilled in facilitating academic work in LACs.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was driven by the guiding research question, "What functions do academic departments serve in faculty work within LACs?" We engaged first in inductive analysis, in which we explored interview transcripts to identify patterns and themes. This began with initial coding, in which we reviewed transcripts carefully to develop the coding structure across cases. We then engaged in second-cycle coding, to develop the codes into themes (Saldaña, 2013). After completing that phase, we employed a deductive analysis by comparing our findings with existing conceptualizations of the functions of academic departments (Patton, 2015).

At the initial inductive phase of analysis, we identified five functions of academic departments related to faculty work within LACs. We then returned to the eight functions of academic departments that were named in previous literature (Anderson, 1977; Hearn, 2007; O'Meara, 2014; Trow, 1977) in the deductive phase of analysis. Of those eight functions, five were very similar to the emergent themes from the inductive analysis; there were no themes from the inductive analysis that were not previously captured in existing typologies. Coding was completed manually, rather than through the use of a software program.

Findings

Findings suggested a preliminary typology of five central functions that academic departments serve in LACs from the faculty perspective. The typology, or classification of distinct functions, represents the themes that emerged through our analysis of interview data.

As shown in Figure 1, participants identified their departments as being instrumental in: (a) faculty hiring, retention, and promotion; (b) new faculty socialization; (c) informal interactions, mentoring, competition and network-building; (d) establishing and communicating institutional and departmental policies, practices, and procedures; and (e) the structuring of academic work. The fourth function integrates two themes from our synthesis of existing typologies: serving a collective representative function within the larger institution and resource allocation. The previously noted functions of teaching and interaction with students and the location of disciplinary work did not emerge as distinct functions, but are included as components of the fifth function, structuring academic work.

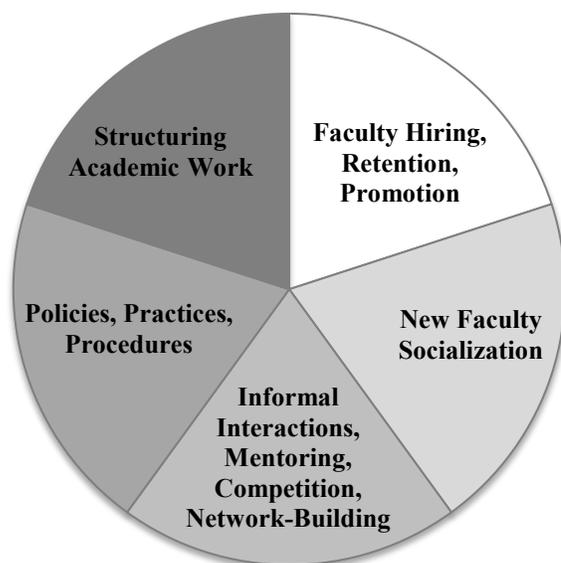


Figure 1: Functions of Academic Departments in Liberal Arts Colleges

In addition to identifying the departmental functions that participants described, we were interested in understanding how those functions played out specifically within the contexts of LACs. In this section, we discuss each of the five functions as contextualized within such institutions.

Faculty Hiring, Retention, and Promotion

As in other institutional contexts, the academic department serves as the primary location of faculty hiring, retention, and promotion decisions within LACs. There were three ways in which participants talked about how such processes affected their work: hiring priorities in LACs; departmental responsibilities for mentoring towards tenure; and concerns about reward structures.

Some participants discussed the challenge of needing to hire generalists to fulfill departmental teaching needs from a pool of specialists within their respective disciplines. One person reflected:

When we searched for someone in this field, we were getting incredibly narrowly trained people applying for the job. And for years, it was almost impossible to find someone who could function in our department. People were applying, and we were making jokes, frankly, about people doing research on cave number 42B, you know? Incredibly narrowly defined research. And that meant that they were coming into the classroom teaching incredibly narrow courses. And unable to make the adjustment to the idea of liberal arts. It took us several years to learn how to interview applicants, to really search out and find the kind of young scholar who was going to be successful at a liberal arts institution.

Other challenges in the faculty hiring process included frequent turnover, the effects of chairing and participating in departmental searches on faculty productivity, and conducting academic searches at conferences and on campus in a way that supported both institutional needs and candidates' expectations. Another professor who had recently completed a search explained:

I am completely disinterested in hiring a brilliant teacher who's gonna be dead weight outside of the classroom. I would much rather have an average instructor who's going to more than carry their weight in department meetings and within the institution....At a school like this, we can't afford a research first, desperately, in our one-time hire.

After the initial hiring phase, departmental responsibilities for faculty careers continued, through the tasks of mentoring towards tenure. Again, the procedural aspect seemed straight forward to participants. Departmental cultures, and larger institutional cultures and administrative styles, influenced the efficacy of such mentoring. On the positive side, one person reflected, "There are annual reviews that originate in the department and then get passed off to the dean's office. We have a fairly robust faculty governance system ... so if things don't seem like they're going well that's caught pretty early on." On the more challenging side, another shared.

You do the stuff at the department level. The senior department members all write a letter and the chair composites those letters. It goes to the promotion and tenure committee, the provost, the president, the board ... Um, but we have a lot of dysfunctional departments, because the administration allows them to be so.

In addition to concerns about the departmental responsibility in the formal review process, some participants also spoke of issues such as workload management, a lack of receptiveness to pre-tenure faculty participation in departmental meetings and decision-making, and climates of intimidation as departmental challenges related to faculty success and promotion. As one participant explained, "I think there are some departments where it could be dangerous for an untenured faculty member to [speak up] if there are people in the department who might be chair when that person goes up for tenure." While there were both examples of both effective and ineffective approaches to mentoring junior colleagues, it was clear that the department was an important location of pre-tenure mentoring within these liberal arts institutions.

The last component of this function related to concerns about reward structures within departments in LACs. Participants spoke of the challenges that arose from having committed to departmental and institutional priorities, then being evaluated under emerging expectations or compared to new colleagues who were more productive in their scholarship. One person stated, "I find it very demoralizing to try to continue to be a team player when we reward those superstars. My way of looking at it is they're able to be a superstar because they're not a team player." Others reflected on turning away from their research based on strong suggestions by departmental peers about institutional values and needs in the early-career stage, then feeling frustrated about changing demands for increased research productivity and not knowing how to restructure their work at the mid- or late-career stages. Another participant posed the question,

What's the reward at the senior level? What do you look at from now until the end of your career when you're working in a place that puts this much emphasis on teaching and doesn't provide you any release time, any research funds, for senior faculty to do something?

Overall, there seemed to be clarity around departmental responsibilities for faculty hiring, retention, and promotion, but at the same time some distinct areas of concern related to fulfilling those functions in the changing contexts of LACs.

New Faculty Socialization

Returning to the early-career stage, there were several sub-themes related to the departmental function of new faculty socialization. The strongest was the notion that both institutions and department share responsibility for training and supporting new faculty hires, and that there is strong variation across departments in terms of how effectively that is done. Again, there were both positive and negative examples of this function. One person recalled,

I think it's very department-specific. I ended up in a department with fantastic mentors who really cared about my success and were willing to invest their time in it. There are some departments that aren't so supportive, and I don't know that the formal network outside of the department is strong enough to counterbalance those negative interactions....But I think for me what was most effective was at the department level.

Some pointed to the challenges of supporting new faculty members in new departments where faculty time is already stretched thin and where there may not be a diverse pool of colleagues, and thus that institutional resources were particularly valuable in supporting new faculty members. Others indicated that it was their departmental colleagues who had provided the necessary support when they joined their colleges. As one associate professor stated, "If I came into this department and did not have experienced faculty members that were active in their research, it would be really hard to push myself it's very important to have accomplished and active researchers to look up to." While this statement came from someone who was interested in maintaining research productivity, other participants described the task of socializing new hires into the liberal arts context differently. One faculty member described his view of the transition from graduate programs to LACs that he observed in new faculty members:

The biggest problem new faculty seem to have here is the time demand with students. Individual meetings, coaching, time spent out of class – something most of us love and that's why we stay – seems somewhat shocking to our new faculty.

Overall, most participants indicated that departmental responsibility for new faculty socialization was particularly relevant in the form of informal interactions, which relates to the third function of academic departments in LACs.

Informal Interactions, Mentoring, Competition, and Network-Building

Across career stages and appointment types, participants spoke of the facilitation of informal relationships and interactions as an important function of academic departments. One participant described the fulfillment of that function as follows:

Overwhelmingly it's informal – being around people in your department, seeing them in the hallway, chatting with them before and after department meetings. That's how most junior faculty will know what it's like to be a faculty member at [this college]."

This included positive outcomes such as friendship, support, mentoring, and collaboration as well as negative outcomes such as stress and anxiety. Describing the positive benefits of her relationships with departmental colleagues, one participant shared,

I've been really blessed because my department has been actually a strength for me. They provided all kinds of support for me when I went on sabbatical, when a relative passed away, and you know, just the regular family crises that come up. They've all been really super supportive of both my professional and personal life and it's been a joy to work with them.

Other manifestations of this function were less encouraging, though also less frequent, than positive accounts. For example, one faculty member shared his frustration about the negative environment in his department:

I wish I could say that that's unusual. But in a lot – and I mean a lot – of departments on campus, there is a dynamic like that. I would tell the provost, “Please come into our department and tell us ‘if you don't straighten up, I'm going to start cutting your departmental budget.’ Do it. And if there are individuals who are misbehaving, tell them, ‘if you don't straighten up, we're going to start cutting your professional development funding.’ Do it. Do something! But that's not going to happen. It's just perplexing....Honestly, it just makes me tired. Makes me tired.

Beyond informal interactions, departments served functions related to formal policies and procedures, the fourth theme.

Departmental and Institutional Policies, Practices, and Procedures

Academic departments serve as a structure through which to establish and communicate both departmental and institutional policies and procedures. There were two main ways in which this occurred according to participants' accounts – personnel policies and institutional support for academic work.

Departments are positioned to provide support and advocacy to faculty members through both implementing and requesting institutional policies, resources, and actions. For example, one person recalled, “When I got really sick, the chair of my department and then the dean were terrific about getting me medical leave.” Another shared a different experience,

They do a very bad job at this, actually. I have been thinking about this a lot lately. I feel that I need to wait until I receive tenure to start having a family. I want a family. There are no policies about maternity leave or taking time off related to tenure and supporting a family. The values are clearly to support balance but the policies aren't there.

Participants shared accounts of relying on departmental peers and leaders for support with family leave, maternity and paternity leave, lactation needs, and personal time for health or family issues. Again, there were both positive and negative accounts of how this function affected faculty work in LACs.

Support for faculty work through departments emerged in several different ways. For example, there were accounts of department chairs advocating for the needs of the department within the larger institutional context in the quest of competing for scarce resources with other units, such as physical space, prioritized renovations, and academic and nonacademic staffing needs. One faculty member in the sciences described a need that the department could fulfill:

Even if a handful of us in the department could share a technician who could make some of those solutions that we need because when it comes time – with the little time we have

to get research done, it's spent just kind of like, "Oops, I don't have A, B, and C," so I can't do what I really am supposed to do today." And so if I could dream big, I would have a technician to help me out, but that's unlikely at a school like this. And so right now, the department has to cover my research costs.

Other types of policy- and practice-related support came through training and resources (or lack thereof) for department chairs to support their roles in facilitating academic work within the departments. One former chair lamented,

I think there are still major issues at [the college] with the creation of the schedule. I spend a lot of time, both trying to avoid conflicts with other classes and other departments, and just with the physical entering of the schedule to the registrar, there's a lot of computer hang-ups still at this point. So that's always turned into a more frustrating process than maybe it needed to be.

Unsurprisingly, participants from colleges with stronger endowments and resources reaped the benefits of those resources at the departmental level. One person explained, "We're fortunate in my department to have considerable resources that were contributed by alumni. If there's something that we want to do in our department, we are usually able to finance them internally." What was more common, however, was departmental needs for academic positions and other resources that participants did not expect to be filled. A faculty member in a humanities department at another institution shared,

In terms of raising money for various things at the college – that's a little harder. I asked a development guy once, you know, "What do you tell people about [this] department?" He's like, "Nothing." The sciences, they get external grants; the grants fund lab support. They have a whole structure over there. And the arts and humanities are under pressure to provide comparable experiences, but not with comparable funding levels. And so that, I think, is a challenge. We're under significant pressure to follow the natural science model, but we're not resourced to follow the natural science model.

Faculty members relied on departmental policies, practices, and procedures to distribute and organize the responsibilities of the department and academic work at the individual level, which relates to the final theme.

The Structuring of Academic Work

Perhaps the most clearly defined function of academic departments for faculty members in LACs is the structuring of tasks and responsibilities. In general, this was organized according to teaching, research, and service. There was a strong subtheme of managing competing responsibilities both at the individual and departmental level within LACs. We turn to that theme before summarizing the other three.

It became evident from the analysis that participants were experiencing competing demands and expectations within LACs and departments, which seemed to be related to changing priorities within LACs. This was, in fact, the strongest subtheme that emerged. One person explained,

There are so many different kinds of things that one is expected to do that budgeting one's time to be effective in all of them is difficult, if not impossible. And so one does need to make choices about where one wants to emphasize one's efforts, because I think there are minimal achievements and standards that one needs to attain, but also one should try to strive to be exceptional in selected areas. Then for a department, hopefully you've got a mix of people so that you've got excellence that kind of covers all the different areas, but you need enough capacity to also meet all the needs.

Other participants echoed these ideas. One said, “I think workload is – I’m sure you hear this from everyone – I think it’s an issue.” Another shared,

On Fridays I have dinner with my wife, and then I’m focusing on my research projects. And if it weren’t for the fact that they were pending, I wouldn’t really have a whole lot of motivation to use my weekends to do research. Because my week is pretty packed with teaching, and with service, and with department administration. In the long run, that’s concerning.

In these small departments, faculty members had to share the workload of teaching, advising, and service. In addition, they had their research activity which most tried to accomplish in the weekends or during the summers. Those same small departmental teams were also required to contribute to faculty governance and institutional needs, as well as maintain expectations towards the liberal arts student experience such as close student-faculty relationships, supervised research opportunities, and campus engagement and development activities. Several faculty participants also held roles such as athletics coaches and chaplaincies, and several had cross-appointments in multiple departments, and were thus expected to serve in two levels of meetings and committee work.

As it related to teaching specifically, there were clear ways in which academic departments structured faculty work. Departments organize teaching-related work within their units, such as teaching assignments, course loads, curricula and course schedules, and student mentoring and academic advising. One person explained how such functions can support faculty work and experiences:

In our department, we don’t have somebody who always does the low-level courses, and then the full professors get their top choice of the upper-level classes. We’re very pragmatic about sharing things and everybody teaches from the lowest to the highest level. There’s not really a totem pole system. That’s important in providing a good atmosphere for people to do their best.

Many participants indicated that teaching within their departments was far and away the highest demand on their time. One person calculated, “We would say that teaching is 60 percent of our job, but realistically, if it weren’t for the summer, it would be 95 percent of our job.” Thus, the functions that departments serve related to teaching had a strong influence on faculty work within LACs.

As indicated in the quote above, many participants explained that research activity was completed on their own time or during the summers, when they were off-contract. This was, in part, a result of institutional and departmental expectations for faculty work. It was also a result of departmental abilities to support scholarship within LAC environments. One person explained,

I’m in a very small department and not that many people do the kind of research that I do. So it’s been very important to me to find outside collaborators and work with them, but both finding those collaborators and finding the time to work with them has been difficult.

Service assignments through the department, at both the departmental and institutional levels, also structured academic work for faculty members in LACs, as in all institutions. The difference, however, may be, again, that the work is distributed through very small departments and also that the liberal arts model places high demands on faculty members for engaged service that are likely to be different from priorities at institutions such as research universities or community colleges. Participants often described complex and time-consuming engagement in service activities. For example, the role of department chairs was one that participants across colleges described as hav-

ing increased in responsibility and decreased in compensation over the years. One faculty member said of his college,

There are questions around service. I wonder if there are best practices that might be shared so we can have more fruitful conversations about what service means and how people take stewardship of the institution without being burdened by it.

Discussion

Research about academic careers has typically favored the institution and the discipline as the organizational locations of interest, while also pointing to the department as the local context of both (Austin, 1996; Lee, 2004). Studies of the professoriate tend to be situated within research universities, which limits knowledge of trends, norms, and experiences in other institution types. This study responds to calls for better knowledge of academic departments as they influence academic work (Gumport, 2007b; Hearn, 2007; Lee, 2007; Ponjuan et al., 2011), and is particularly relevant in its consideration of the perceived role of the department among faculty members in LACs as a distinct institution type. There are three key points from our findings related to both similarities and distinctiveness of academic departments in LACs as compared to other institution types.

First, we considered the functions of academic departments in LACs, based on prior typologies. We specifically considered how these functions are similar to and different from what has been observed or theorized in studies of academic work outside of LACs. In general, our findings support prior conceptualizations of departmental functions (Anderson, 1977; Hearn, 2007; O'Meara et al., 2014; Trow, 1977). Evidence of the five functions of academic departments for faculty members in LACs, however, suggests the salience of institution type in shaping those functions. One similarity that is observed across contexts is the departmental role in hiring, supporting, and promoting faculty members. Yet, within LACs, that role is contextualized by particular and evolving institutional expectations of faculty work. Related to a changing reality in LACs, senior faculty members had not grounded their careers and departmental contributions in research in the same way as with teaching and service over the years under prior institutional priorities and faculty guidelines for tenure promotion. Junior faculty members trained to conduct research in research universities often (but not always) joined departments formally and informally led by colleagues who did not prioritize research in the same ways that they intended to do, and in ways quite different from the environments in which they were trained to conduct academic work (Austin, 2002; Golde & Dore, 2001). As another example, while all academic departments are likely to be important for communicating policy and representation within the institution, those functions are characterized in LACs by concerns about effective policy and leadership development for supporting faculty members, as well as notable service demands at both the departmental and institutional levels that limit engagement in research and may negatively contribute to faculty success and satisfaction. The ways in which all functions influenced academic work were contextualized in and drew meaning from their larger organizational locations in LACs. Future research that applies the emergent typology to additional colleges beyond those included in this consortium would be useful. While our focus is on understanding faculty work in LACs, findings may also apply to research and practice about departments in other institution types.

Second, in addition to the customization of departmental functions within the liberal arts context there were two key differences between our typology and previous research. The functions of student learning, development, and socialization and of disciplinary research as documented by prior studies (Andersen, 1977; Austin, 1996; Hearn, 2007; Trow, 1977) did not emerge as salient in our analysis. We suspect that student learning did not emerge as a distinct function for several reasons. Teaching and interactions with students were indirectly influenced frequently as roles that participants were expected to fulfill within their institutions. However, other than the bureau-

cratic tasks of teaching assignments and fulfilling instructional needs, which we included in the function of structuring academic work, participants did not refer to their departments as the organizational locations or structures in which teaching and student-related work were situated. It may be that due to the centrality of teaching and mentoring relationships with students in LACs, faculty members conceptualize their teaching roles as being affiliated with institutional missions rather than departmental responsibilities. This may be particularly true given the nature of liberal arts degrees, which favor a breadth of knowledge that expands across disciplines. Further, prior literature has specified doctoral student learning and socialization as a function of the department (O'Meara et al., 2014). The task of preparing and socializing doctoral students is not one that exists within LACs. Again, however, instructional tasks were an important component of the function of structuring academic work, a function which applies both to the collective department as a whole and the individual faculty member working within that context.

Third, across functions, there is a very consistent finding that participating institutions are undergoing an evolution, or perhaps revolution, which has strong implications for academic work in such contexts. We see potential reasons why the function of disciplinary research and scholarship, as documented by prior literature, did not emerge in this study. This finding supports prior research about the changing contexts of LACs (Anderson & Svrluga, 2015; Baker & Baldwin, 2015; Breneman, 1990; Rivard, 2013). At the crosshairs of traditional expectations for teaching and service and emerging trends in the academic labor force and increasing demands for both initial employment qualifications and ongoing productivity throughout the tenure and promotion processes, LACs seem to be increasing expectations for high productivity across all components of academic work, often with fewer institutional and departmental resources to support such work. Liberal arts faculty members in this study reported being expected to fulfill increasing institutional needs of their departments related to teaching and service, in addition to maintaining personal responsibilities. Most reported that this meant time for research was left for weekends and summers. This necessity may have contributed to participants' senses that their research was not connected to their departmental identities and responsibilities. Many faculty members across ranks and with diverse career histories described shifting priorities for academic work within their institutions, and a general lack of effectiveness in supporting research and inquiry. Increasing expectations related to faculty productivity and visibility, supervising undergraduate research, and contributing to institutional reputation were problematically disconnected from institutional support for faculty research, particularly in light of competing demands. There is a need for studies of exemplary institutions that have demonstrated agility in supporting academic work and meeting institutional priorities within the liberal arts type.

Implications for Practice

These findings about the functions of academic departments for academic work in LACs point to three recommendations for practice. Higher education scholars and administrators have offered practical advice for how departments may serve as sources of support for tenure cases (Tierney & Bensimon, 1996), collegial relationships (Hu-DeHart, 2000), holistic faculty development (Weiner, 2015), and dealing with workplace bullying (Sallee & Lester, 2009) or problematic behavior (Crookston, 2012). This study adds to those perspectives by offering evidence of the specific ways that academic departments influence academic work within LACs. Understanding the influence of the academic department in faculty careers provides a foundation from which to consider the effects of the departments in shaping formal policies, practices, and procedures that promote the work of the disciplines and the mission of the institution. This foundation of knowledge allows for consideration of the informal interactions, cultures, and relationships that so heavily influence faculty experiences, success, and satisfaction.

Findings suggest implications for practice related to the ways that administrators in LACs understand and support the departmental context of faculty careers. Departmental leadership and collegiality are critical in attracting, mentoring, supporting, developing, promoting, and retaining faculty members. Due to the role of departments as the local home of both institutional and disciplinary norms, they may be the most important source of support for academic work within LACs. A need for administrative efforts to train and empower effective departmental leaders is one clear implication of this work. Strong department chairs serve a pivotal role in supporting and organizing academics on behalf of the institution, and also advancing institutional priorities through that support collective efforts within the department. Institution-wide conversations about findings from this study would also facilitate cross-departmental efforts to understand current strengths and weaknesses in the structuring of academic work. For example, department chairs and search committees could be better equipped to describe the realities of academic work in LACs to prospective faculty members in order to attract candidates with a strong fit with institutional mission, resource priorities, and culture, as well as the ways in which those influence individual and departmental activities.

Findings suggest that institution type must be considered when communicating with faculty members about expectation for academic work and departmental contributions. For junior faculty members, there may be a need for support in the transition from their alma mater research universities to their employing LACs, and also a need to help such scholars balance high institutional and departmental expectations for teaching, service, and engagement with their personal goals related to scholarly productivity and research activity. For more senior faculty members, support related to thriving as department members and leaders in the face of changing expectations and resources in LACs is also warranted. We also encourage consideration of findings as they relate to institutionally-sponsored faculty professional development, access and equity, and approaches to faculty promotion and retention.

Conclusion

Anderson (1976) wrote, “to understand departments is to go a long way in understanding colleges and universities (p. 1). This study confirms findings from prior research that have reported the complex expectations of faculty members in LACs across the areas of teaching, research, and service, as well as student support, institutional governance and advancement, and community engagement (Baker et al., 2012; Hendrickson et al., 2013; Reder, 2010). It suggests that academic departments are critical contexts within LACs for fulfilling those expectations through the organization and structuring of individual and collective faculty work, in line with prior scholarship about the importance of the department (Hearn, 2007; Peterson, 1970, 1976). Our goal was to inform research and practice to improve the experiences and outcomes of faculty members and therefore the LACs and students they serve. Continued research and innovative practices are needed to continue to understand and strengthen all stakeholders in this important sector of higher education. Our findings suggest that better supporting faculty work through departmental contexts is one such area of inquiry and improvement.

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