"Clustering Academic Units and Services: The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly"
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What is clustering? Clustering probably means something different to whoever is implementing it.

Our college has been decentralized forever. The academic departments had primary responsibility for all administrative and student services. This include the traditional HR, Benefits, Purchasing, Accounting, Travel as well as both graduate and undergraduate student affairs, record keeping and recruitment. Our faculty and staff had been happy with this organization. Our departments tended to be smaller and more intimate that many of your units. Because of this our administrative personnel, no matter what the formal duties, were pretty much “mothers” to the faculty and other departmental personnel. Naturally, the service was loved.

The first clustering of administrative services in our college occurred effective July 1, 1996. Other academic units around the campus followed the model within the next couple of years. In the late 1990s there was a second clustering in another unit of our College, which was incredibly painful. Then in 2004 another academic department was clustered into our unit. During this time there were other centralizing efforts being made such as consolidation of graduate student affairs, undergraduate advising. Presently there is yet another administrative model being developed. But let’s get back to our first clustering.

The model our Dean chose to follow was to lay off all the administrative employees in three academic departments and two centers. The administration of those units would be assigned to existing departments.

I am not aware of how much notice or involvement the Chairs had but the announcement was made around 90 days in advance of the pending clustering. Faculty in generally appeared very surprised. The commitment that the Dean made at the faculty meetings was that they would see only minimal change in service. They would remain complete separate departments with separate and independent budgets and policies. There would probably be some minor changes in the procedures but they would be very happy.
The morale of the effected staff hit rock bottom and when the college notified the administrative employees of their lay off in on May 1st, went even lower. Existing personnel in my department were not laid off, however I had one vacant position and it was pulled. The staff went into an internal preferential rehire pool. I was allowed to hire two positions from this pool. The two other departments that also were clustered each received one FTE. In all a total of 15 positions were eliminated and six found positions on the campus. My office went from 6 FTE serving 19 faculty to 8 FTE serving 38. Numbers wise, this was a 100% workload increase with a 33% staff increase.

The first big hurdle we had to overcome was that the staff being laid off knew intellectually that the remaining staff were not responsible for the clustering, but were angry and bitter. This led to difficulties in cooperation with the transition. Per chance I had hired the Academic Personnel Coordinator from one of the academic departments we inherited and the Graduate Student Affairs officer from the other. They helped quite a bit instructing us how things were done in their departments. The other personnel were so uncooperative that we decided to wait until they were gone and standardize procedures to our own.

A second area we dealt with was the feeling of overwork by the remaining staff. As you might surmise, the service level could not be maintained. Initially, due to the Dean’s guarantee that they would be happy with the outcome, the faculty would not accept any reduction in services. The staff felt swamped and it almost seemed like extra service was being demanded to “make me happy.” We standardized as many processes as we could and I charged the staff with working individually with each faculty to show them what we do and how this will work better. The thought was that if we could win them over one by one, eventually we would earn their support. It took a good two years but were able to earn their respect and support.

In their defense part of the problem was our space. We are located in seven buildings on the campus and faculty was just not into walking to a different building for service. The faculty referred to this as a loss of departmental integrity. There was no more department office or department mailroom. There
was only shared facility which they did not consider their own. I had a requirement that I would go to each facility every day and at least walk through acknowledging as many personnel as possible. The rest of the staff was to go as often as possible. This took a lot of time but I felt it was something that was needed to build the collegiality. Even so, as I mentioned earlier, it took a good two years for the new faculty to fully accept us as their staff.

Another problem we encountered that was not expected and you should be aware of is that personnel from their original departments that were hired became “our” staff and the rest of us were “your” staff. This favoritism lessened over time but did not end until those personnel moved on.

Over the years other units were added to our cluster until we had six separate units. One thing that took some of the steam off our unit was the centralization of Graduate Student Affairs in 1998. This removed responsibility for graduate recruitment and records from the department and placed it in a centralized unit administered by the College. The faculty did not like this and refocused their anger at the College Administration.

On July 1, 2004 another department was added to our cluster and we began the process all over again. This time we absorbed what was left of their office staff. We currently have 13 FTE providing administrative services to 53 faculty FTE. This time the faculty was not forewarned, did not expect a clustering and simply refused to cooperate. We had “our staff” and “your staff”. It, again took a few years to acclimate the faculty, and I’m not sure we have. This particular department is noted for it’s difficult faculty. One thing we are experience now which creates it’s own difficulties is faculty turn over. Those who were here at the beginning are gone and new senior faculty have come in, including two Chairs. These folk do not like the organization and seem to feel that if they ignore it, it will go away. Communication has become a huge issue. The Chairs are located in different buildings and simply do not talk to the administrative staff. This tends to be a problem when you have a single department and the Chairs office is right next door. Imagine four academic departments with the Chair in a different building.
I do not think there will be more clustering. Presently it seems we are moving toward college wide centralization. Which will contain it’s own problems.

My recommendations are to remain flexible and keep the communications open. You will most likely run into a lack of cooperation by faculty. Earning their respect will take care of that problem. We found the best way to do that was to “kill them with kindness.” Remember, the onus will be on you to make it work.