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## Effective Utilization of Faculty Task Forces for Problem Solving

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### Abstract

Deans and Directors of Academic Programs typically utilize a variety of approaches in problem solving within their specified areas of responsibility. Some of these various administrative approaches to problem solving include top down, bottom up, ad hoc delegation, standing committee referral, and faculty task forces. Administrators may use all these various approaches over time, depending upon the problem one is facing, the resources available, the administrative and support staff, and other factors.

The "top-down" administrative approach to problem solving is typically used by administrators for a variety of problems. In this case, the administrator does the investigation, looks at alternative courses of action, and makes the decision by himself, or with the counsel of a limited number of colleagues. This style of problem solving is a very efficient one, but does not always take advantage of other resources available in making decisions. A direct opposite of the first style would be the "bottom up" or laissez-faire approach, where problems are left to be solved

by individual faculty or at the unit level within the college. In this case, the major college level administrators basically leave such problems to be handled at the lowest possible level, with little or no interference from top administration.

The last three approaches are between these two extremes. The ad hoc delegation approach is typically used by Deans for dealing with many problems where there is a qualified subordinate to handle the particular problem. The individual may be an Assistant Dean, Department Chair, or specific faculty members. The standing committee referral method is typically used where problems fall within the domain of specific committees. The best examples would be in the academic programs area where problems in courses would be referred to curriculum committees, questions pertaining to graduate programs to the college graduate committee, etc.

The task force approach typically utilizes an ad hoc committee appointed by the Dean to develop recommendations for dealing with a specified problem(s). Many Deans use this particular approach over time, successfully or unsuccessfully! Task forces have a very unique and distinct role to play in problem solving. Administrators should not undertake utilization of a task force for problem solving without some cognizance of these transaction costs and risks. The major purposes of this paper are: to describe the rationale for utilizing the task force approach to problem solving, the typical processes utilized in such

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an approach, and the primary causes of task force failures. Finally, academic programs in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida are utilized as a case study example of utilizing task forces for the period 1991-00.

### Introduction

Colleges of Agriculture (Agricultural and Life Sciences, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences) Deans and/or Directors of Academic Programs, Agriculture Experiment Stations, and Cooperative Extension Services typically utilize a variety of approaches to problem solving within their specified areas of responsibility. Various administrative approaches to problem solving are detailed in Table 1 (Tennebaum and Schmidt, 1973). Administrators may use all of these approaches over time, depending upon the problem one is facing, the resources available, the quality of administrative and support staff, time available, as well as other factors.

The "top-down" administrative approach to problem solving is typically used by administrators for many problems. In this case, the administrator does the investigation, analyzes alternative courses of action, and makes the decisions, sometimes with the counsel of colleagues. This style of problem solving is very efficient, but does not involve the faculty in making decisions. Hence, this approach may not always be popular with the faculty particularly for problems involving major policy decisions.

A direct opposite of the first style would be the "bottom-up"/laissez-faire approach, where problems are left to be solved by individual faculty or at the unit level within the college. In this case, college administrators basically leave problems to be handled at the lowest possible level,

with little or no interference from college administration. The outcomes of this approach are often unpredictable, but are usually more tailored to individual unit needs and preferences.

The other alternatives in Table 1 are intermediate approaches between the first two extremes. The "ad hoc delegation" approach is typically used by Deans/Directors for problem solving when there is a qualified subordinate(s) to handle a particular problem. The individual may be an Associate Dean/Director, Department Chair, or specific faculty members. The "standing committee referral" method is typically used where problems fall within the domain of specific committees. Examples would be in academic programs where courses would be referred to curriculum committees, questions pertaining to graduate programs to the college graduate committee, etc.

The "task force" approach typically utilizes an ad hoc committee appointed by the Dean/Director to develop recommendations for dealing with a specified problem(s). Many Deans/Directors use this particular approach over time both successfully and unsuccessfully! The major purposes of this paper are: to describe the rationale for utilizing the task force approach to problem solving, the appropriate processes utilized with effective task forces, and the primary causes of task force failures. Academic programs in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida are utilized as a case study example of utilizing task forces for the period 1991-99, (Campton, et al., 1993; Cheek, et al, 1993; McGhee, et al., 1993).

### Rationale For Using Task Forces

Task forces would typically be utilized for problem solving when the conditions detailed in Table 2 are viewed as being important by the Dean/Director. The task force is

**Table 1. Alternative Administrative Approaches to Problem Solving in Colleges of Agriculture**

1. "Top Down" administrative
  2. "Bottom Up"/Laissez-Faire
  3. Ad Hoc Delegation
  4. Standing Committee Referral
  5. Task Force
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**Table 2. Rationale for Using Task Force Approach to Problem-Solving in Colleges of Agriculture**

1. "One-time" problem solution needed
  2. Diverse expertise/disciplines needed for specific problem solving
  3. Faculty involvement/acceptance/empowerment important
  4. Maintains administrative involvement (in task force specification and charge, and approval and implementation of recommendations)
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**Table 3. Processes for Effective Task Force Utilization in College of Agriculture Problem Solving**

	<u>Process</u>	<u>Responsibility</u>
1.	Problem definition(s)	Administrator
2.	Specification of task force composition, charge, and time frame	Administrator
3.	Task force completion of assignment	Faculty
4.	Administrator/task force interaction in consensus building	Faculty/Administrator
5.	Administrative implementation	Administrator
6.	Review/evaluation	Administrator/Faculty

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an excellent vehicle for dealing with a "one-time" problem. It is not appropriate for dealing with problems which are repetitive in nature over time. A task force also offers several other advantages: it enables administrators to utilize diverse disciplinary skills for dealing with specific problems and it involves the faculty very intimately in the problem solving process. Finally, it enables the administrator to maintain some involvement in the process, through the specification of the task force and the charge, and the final approval and implementation of the recommendations. (Collins and Porras, 1996; Kotter, 1995).

### **Processes For Effective Task Force Utilization**

Typically, six process are needed to effectively utilize task forces dealing with college level problem solving and they are displayed in Table 3. Some of these processes are carried out by administrators, others are under the domain of the faculty, and some involve both parties. (Collins and Porras, 1996; Mintzberg, 1994).

The first two tasks are the specific responsibility of the college Dean/Director. The college administrator must have a clear understanding of what the problem is before proceeding. The problem must be important, complex, and one in which the expertise of various

disciplinary skills are needed. Sufficient time must be available for a task force to carry out its charge.

The next step in the process involves the specification of who serves on the task force, the specific charge given, and time frame. These are presented in Table 4. Nothing is more important than who is specified to serve on the task force, and who chairs the group. Of paramount importance are the size of the task force, the representation of diverse faculty/disciplinary elements, and appropriate personality mix. The charge needs to be abundantly clear to all members of the task force. The charge should precisely explain what is expected to be accomplished. This also implicitly clarifies what the group is not expected to. Finally, the time frame should specify when a preliminary report should be submitted to the Dean/Director, and how the task force is to solicit input from faculty, chair, and other administrators.

The third and fourth processes deal with the faculty task force carrying out its assignment, and iterating with administration in developing a final consensus on recommendations/courses of action. Failure to interact may result in a preparation of a report which is never utilized, because it is not supported by the faculty and unit administration. Once the task force and the administrator have

agreed upon the report and its recommendations, it is then the responsibility of the administrator to implement the report at the earliest possible convenience. Failure to implement the report will result in loss of confidence by the faculty in the administrator, and a faculty reluctance to serve on any future task forces.

Review and evaluation can only be accomplished at some point in the future after the recommendations have been implemented. At some point, it is useful for administrators to review past task force activities, and develop ways in which future task forces can be improved. Also, the changes that have been implemented should be reviewed and evaluated and appropriate modifications made.

### Primary Causes of Task Force Failures

If faculty in colleges of agriculture across the country were surveyed, a number of faculty would probably point out that many task force reports only “gathered dust” on shelves in the Dean’s office! For good reasons, many task forces fail. (Kotter, 1995). With a few exceptions, the failures can usually be traced back to the administrator’s office and his/her lack of implementation of the task force report and its recommendations.

The first cause for failure is poor specification of the task force composition, chair, and/or charge. See Table 5. Without the appropriate people on the task force, and a clear charge, task forces are almost doomed from the beginning. New administrators would be well-advised not to appoint task forces until they either know the faculty, or they have the benefit of counsel from subordinates as to

the appropriateness of various individuals serving on the task forces.

There is often a rush to develop a report and have it distributed quickly without allowing time for adequate interaction with the appropriate administrator. Many times, there needs to be a number of iterations between the faculty and administrator prior to completing a final consensus report. The Dean/Director must ensure that this interaction has occurred.

Finally, nothing arouses the ire and sarcasm of the faculty any more than the development of a task force report for which there is no implementation. In some instances, recommendations may not be feasible because of ensuing budget restraints or political barriers. However, the Dean/Director needs to communicate with the faculty as to why they were not implemented. The administrator must also maintain a sense of urgency.

### A Case Study Example

During the period 1991-92 to 1999-00, the Deans of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida utilized approximately 22 task forces in reviewing and making changes in its academic programs (Table 6) (Comer et al., 1996). The task forces were developed and implemented utilizing the principles enumerated in this paper. These task forces dealt with basically four categories: college-wide academic programs, individual majors/minors, faculty evaluation and awards, and facilities/equipment. The Florida approach began with the specification of three broad college task forces: off-campus instruc-

**Table 4. Guidelines for Creating a Task Force For Problem Solving In a College of Agriculture**

1. Limit size of task force to no more than ten
  2. Diversity representation
    - a. Areas of college - animal, plant, social, and basic sciences; natural resources, other?
    - b. Some faculty representatives by rank, sex, and race
    - c. Do not need representation from each department
    - d. Select faculty with skills/knowledge/experience in area of concern
  3. Personality mix of a task force
    - a. In a Meyers-Briggs context, insure faculty representation of innovators, academics, and pragmatists
      1. Limit number of “careful compilers”
    - b. Avoid personalities who are “blockers,” “domineering,” “detailed types,” or “resistance to change”
    - c. Select a task force chair who can work with and elicit the support of the members
  4. Task force charge should be clear, concise, and explicit
  5. Time frame for task force activity should be reasonable, but no excessively long
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**Table 5. Primary Causes of Task Force Failures in College of Agriculture Problem Solving**

1. Poor specification of task force composition, chair, and/or charge
  2. Inadequate interaction between administration and faculty in reaching a consensus
  3. Poor/no implementation
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tional programs, graduate programs, and undergraduate programs. These faculty task forces completed their work about the same time that State University System of Florida mandated program reviews were completed. These task force reports and program reviews provided the framework for appropriate administrative/faculty action and follow-up task forces to deal with more specific problems. Hence, the performance and impacts of the 22 task forces must be analyzed in a collective context.

The 22 task forces were successful in helping bring about many changes in the college. New majors/minors were developed, existing majors were merged or reorganized, a distance education program was launched, and various other faculty development and student programs were initiated. The end result was a considerable growth in enrollment: the undergraduate enrollment increased 150 percent and graduate by 7 percent. Minority undergraduate enrollment rose to approximately 24 percent and graduate enrollment to 12 percent (Cheek et al., 1994). With the increased enrollment, funding was secured for 58 additional faculty positions and 52 new staff positions. The recurring college teaching budget (excluding salaries) increased by \$2,295,000 (230 percent). Nonrecurring funds of \$2,816,000 were allocated to units for upgrading equipment and teaching laboratories by utilizing the salary savings from unfilled, new enrollment growth positions.

Although the utilization of the various task forces greatly contributed to the growth and development of the college, some problems were encountered. One task force was disbanded because of interpersonal relationships. In retrospect, the composition of the committee assembled was probably inappropriate. On several task forces, the Dean/Assistant Deans were not able to reach a consensus with the faculty on every recommendation. Budget and political constraints prohibited the implementation of some recommendations. Nevertheless, the overall "batting average" was quite high, considering the number of task

forces utilized. Where there were problems, they usually were the responsibility of the Deans. A comprehensive overview of the programmatic changes in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida can be viewed at the following web site: [floridafirst.ufl.edu/pdfs/acprog.pdf](http://floridafirst.ufl.edu/pdfs/acprog.pdf) (Cheek et al., 1999).

Task forces have a unique and distinct role to play in problem solving in colleges of agriculture if properly utilized. Administrators must clearly understand the rationale for their use, the appropriate processes, and the primary causes of failure in order to effectively utilize them. Transaction costs in terms of faculty and administrative time can be rather substantial. There are also risks associated with task force failure and faculty alienation with such a change process. Therefore, Agriculture Deans/Directors should not undertake the utilization of task forces for problem solving without some cognizance of the concepts detailed in this article.

**Table 6. Task Forces Utilized By the Deans of the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Florida, 1991 - 1999**

1. College-wide Academic Programs - 9
  - a. College Undergraduate Program, College Graduate Program (1992 and 1998 -99), Off-Campus Instructional Programs, Distance Education (teaching and extension), Upper Division College Honors Program, Information Technology, Minority Student Programs, Undergraduate Enrichment
2. Individual Majors/Minors - 8
  - a. Human Resource Development, Environmental Management in Agriculture, Animal Sciences, Plant Science, Turfgrass Science, Packaging Science, Plant Molecular and Cellular Biology, Distance Education Masters of Natural Resources Management
3. Faculty Evaluation and Awards - 3
  - a. College Teaching Awards, Teaching Improvement Program Awards, Teaching Portfolios and Peer Evaluation
4. Facilities/Equipment - 2
  - a. Computer/GIS Equipment and Lab
  - b. Proposed University Biotechnology Building (Teaching and Agricultural Experiment Station)

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