Responding to Administrative Priorities

An Organizational Model Supporting Retention Through Fostering Loyalty

Capsule: Positioning the undergraduate engineering experience as belonging to an exclusive club provides the opportunity to build loyalty to an institution and the profession while taking advantage of an existing attitude that engineering students naturally belong to a "meritocracy of difficulty."

Summary: The development of individual and corporate identities as engineers among undergraduates depends, in part, on when and how students are officially admitted to a school or program, according to Stevens, *et al*. (2008); as a result, students at different schools tend to experience different types of social, institutional, and professional connection and association. A common thread to the students' experiences, though, is a sense of solidarity due to the (perceived) higher difficulty of courses and the concomitantly increased time invested in their studies than that experienced by non-engineering students. This "meritocracy of difficulty," as the solidarity is called by Stevens, *et al*. (2007), is a way of justifying greater rewards expected upon entering professional practice: engineering students have it harder in school than non-engineering students and therefore the former "deserve" better paybacks after graduation than the latter. The "awarding" of engineering-specific accoutrements, such as lab access codes, and the use of engineering-only spaces help intensify the sense of membership in an exclusive club defined by the "meritocracy"; the sacrifices students make to study engineering are redeemed by the rewards of belonging to the club. Berman and Laitin (2008) suggest that this organizational model tends to foster loyalty among members to each other and the organization. However, there is research that suggests an undue emphasis on "meritocracy" can alienate students from underrepresented populations in engineering, since the engineering culture is perceived as still heavily rooted in the white, middle class male world. (Du, 2006)

Implications for Engineering Education: Basing the student experience on this organizational model may have both positive and negative effects; the point is to manage the process and the resulting culture carefully in order to accentuate the positive and ameliorate the negative when taking advantage of an identity already prevalent in the student community. For example, females may have their sense of social identity threatened if the atmosphere becomes too exclusionary, leading to a feeling of being outnumbered; refer to the discussion in the RAP The Problem With Being Outnumbered. Threats to social identity can be alleviated, however, by concurrent fostering of environments and cultures supportive of female persistence; see, for example, the discussions in DEEPs The Impact of Faculty Attitudes and Activities on Student Recruitment and Retention and The Impact of Faculty Attitudes and Activities on Academic Climate and Culture, and the *CHANGE* Factors Supporting the Retention/Persistence of Female Undergraduates. A benefit of developing a strong sense of loyalty to an institution and a profession is a probable increase in the likelihood of retention in both.

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