Department-ism: More Than Just Space Wars

July 18, 2013

The university is a great place to learn about prejudice — firsthand. The prejudice that I’m talking about is so deeply ingrained in the nature of universities and other large organizations that it is not recognized as a near kin of racism, sexism, ageism, or the other “isms” that can be found in the appendix of most general psychology texts. Perhaps it is not surprising that academic psychologists have avoided even naming the prejudice that is openly practiced on our own campuses and within our own discipline. What I am talking about is departmentism. I had my first strong whiff of departmentism when the psychology department, the largest department on my campus (and, we always quietly add, the best) moved from our assorted offices in those “temporary” buildings that remain a permanent fixture on many campus into a spacious and wonderfully modern building. There was one little problem: The College of Business believed it was their new building and property values were sure to go down if psychology moved into their neighborhood.

On the face of it, why should it matter if an office, laboratory, or lounge is inhabited by someone from the psychology department or accounting department? The building had 40-50 empty faculty offices before we moved in, not counting the ones that were being “used” by deceased faculty members, bogus student groups, and my all-time favorite, the “PC Users Club.” Objectively, there was plenty of room for all of us. But it really, really did matter a lot. It was clear to each side that the other department wanted to steal valuable resources — space, equipment, conference tables, water fountains (?) — that rightfully belonged to one’s own group.

The ensuing Space Wars bore an eerie similarity to border warfare in any of the world’s hot spots. Battle lines were drawn as business departments squared off against psychology. Psychologists with appointments in business departments seemed to be the most hostile, as though they had to prove their loyalty to their home department for all the same reasons that Japanese-American troops had to be the bravest during World War II.

Hostilities continued to grow after we moved into “their” building. In our previous building, the copy machine loaded documents face down; the copier in the new building loaded documents face up. A senior professor in psychology loaded her originals into the new copier face down, then wondered why the copies were blank. This story was retold countless times with sneers and chuckles by business faculty and staff — psychologists really were as dumb as they had feared we would be.

The day I moved into my new office (nice and new, but with a view overlooking the parking lot — all the mountain view rooms were already taken by them.) I piled the empty cartons into the hall. Business faculty sniffed at my unkempt manners and stories that we (the psychology department) were sloppy and dirty as well, were soon spread with great glee.

I wish I could tell tales about how well the psychology department stayed above the fray, that we were unwilling to engage in mudslinging or petty annoyances, that we responded with a level of unconditional
positive regard worthy of Gandhi. But it would be a lie. In an attempt at reconciliation, we planned a joint building-wide Christmas party (later changed to Holiday party when someone complained about the name). Many on both sides boycotted the festivities, refusing to eat or party with them. Of course, not everyone responded in the worst way possible — some were merely bad. One of my new neighbors from marketing (or is he in management? Oh well, what’s the difference? They’re all the same) told me this week that he personally likes most of his psychology neighbors. Some are even his good friends, but why (present company excluded, he assured me) do we all dress so badly?

Departmentism, like other prejudices, has a serious and ugly side. One member on a campus-wide committee that was responsible for awarding competitive research funds ranked every application from psychology in the lowest pile. The ranking results were reminiscent of the Olympics, where some judges routinely rate athletes from selected other countries well below the scores given by the other judges. The anomalous ranking of research proposals is a good example to use in stat classes when we need to explain why outliers are often discarded from a distribution.

Many readers will recognize within-department prejudices to be as insidious as those between departments. Psychology departments sometimes break into small fiefdoms to engage in internecine warfare where clinicians, neuroscientists, developmental faculty and other subspecialties war among themselves for open faculty lines, clinic or lab pace, equipment upgrades, graduate students, and sometimes even supplies.

Now, after four years in our new building, we are eagerly awaiting another move to the new Social Sciences Building, where the fighting begins anew, but this time it’s us against those bad people in sociology, political science, and the other social science departments with whom we will have to share our new building. And worst of all, I’ve heard that they’re really dumb and sloppy.