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Statement of Consulting Approach

The elements of my philosophy are simple: it is essential to understand the goals and expectations for the consultation; to work together with people in the organization to develop as complete and valid a picture as possible of the department and its environment in order to meet those goals and expectations; and to fulfill each step (including the final report) on time. A useful consultation balances generalized knowledge of departments and institutions with an appreciation of institutionally-specific resources, opportunities and constraints. Effectively carrying out this philosophy is not simple – it requires the abilities to understand quickly what are often nuanced differences in experience and perception, the effective development of trust, and an appreciation of extra-departmental constraints.

I believe that people working in (or with) a department know a lot about departmental functioning and about any particular questions that the consultant may be addressing. Often, however, people have quite different perceptions of practices, policies, and organizational environment. These differences can exist for a long time because of varied experiences and because of a common tendency to avoid conflictful topics. Thus, for a consultant to be fully informed requires speaking to a broad range of individuals, and reading available materials about the department, and the institution. Conversations must occur in a setting that allows the guarantee of confidentiality when appropriate. While faculty are often aware of differences among department members, the presence of and then the input from the consultant provides an opportunity to open up a constructive conversation.

Since my first departmental consultations, I have been struck by the relevance of the Indian tale of the blind men and the elephant – each man has a contrasting description of the animal, depending on which part he is near and able to experience. Likewise, the individuals with whom I meet on a site visit have distinctive standpoints, often shaping very different understandings of the department. A consultant needs to be aware of these differences and to understand their sources, as part of fulfilling her role. In the departments where very different perceptions about the department exist, I suggest approaches to developing a clearer set of collectively shared understandings.

My approach has grown out of experiences at Montclair State, through reviews and trainings I have conducted or participated in with the ASA Departmental Resources Group, and from my work with universities and colleges that are NSF-ADVANCE awardees (as an external evaluator or advisory board member, and as an NSF Program Director or site visit committee member). The ADVANCE Program supports organizational changes in policies and practices aimed at providing gender-equitable environments, improving the opportunities for advancement for women in academic careers. As Program Director I made more than a dozen visits to funded institutions. Some were short, technical advice visits to new awardees, on others I accompanied a team of external site visitors I had assembled for a mid-award (third year) review. I have served on a score of such site visit committees (before and since my service as a Program Director). Although most of the ADVANCE projects do not emphasize the social science units on their campuses, the approach I developed in sociology or combined departments has been well suited to my work with ADVANCE.