Shirley A. Jackson Statement of Consulting Approach

I served for three and a half years (2016-2019) as chair of an interdisciplinary department, Black Studies, in the School of Gender, Race, and Nations at Portland State University. Prior to my arrival at Portland State in 2016, I first served as chair of the Sociology Department at Southern Connecticut State University from 2001-2007 and then as the graduate coordinator of its master’s program from 2011-2015. My early academic career as a department chair helped me to become a keen observer of opportunities and pitfalls facing programs and departments.

When I first became a department chair, I was a relatively new assistant professor and one of the two junior faculty members in the department. It is highly unusual to be an untenured assistant professor serving as chair, but I was fortunate to have the support of my colleagues and the administration. This opportunity to serve as chair was more important than I realized at the time. The department had not been reviewing its curriculum on a regular basis. As a result, it was providing students with an out of date list of elective courses taught elsewhere on campus (some of which had not been taught in many years) and lacked updated course articulation agreements for transfer students. Furthermore, the department had not really worked on developing clear internship guidelines for its majors. Once I encouraged the department to move in the direction of curriculum changes that made the undergraduate program easier to navigate due to a greater emphasis on developing skill sets that were in alignment with the guidelines of the American Sociological Association we were able to increase the number of undergraduate students admitted into the master’s program in sociology.

Each time I have taken on the role of chair, I remember how much work was required, but also how much I enjoyed it. There is always a learning curve and a multitude of challenges, but there are also opportunities. For example, as a new chair in a joint department I had to address the department changing from Sociology & Anthropology to a Sociology Department. The anthropology faculty had been in the process of splitting off but did so much earlier than everyone had anticipated. Although we could have viewed this as a loss, both programs and departments learned that this set the stage for defining and redefining ourselves. This usually meant taking a good hard look at where we were and where we hoped to be. I ask departments this question when I participate in reviews. It helps them to see what they had not seen about their strengths and weaknesses.

In my most recent role as chair of an interdisciplinary department, I encountered an entirely new set of challenges. One was being told a few weeks into the role that the department was due for a program review within the next 12-15 months. There was also the familiar challenge of reviewing department curriculum that had not undergone any significant revision in a number of years. Fortunately, my previous experience came in handy. I learned a long time ago that program reviews are stressful. One way to alleviate the stress is to move away from a defensive stance where a review is forced on a program or department from up above. Instead, the review should be viewed as an opportunity to rethink program requirements, revise course titles and descriptions, and consider the ways in which new faculty hires and the retirements of existing faculty can help move from what a department is to where it could be. Departments of sociology come in all shapes and sizes. Some are single discipline departments while others are made of two or three different programs and some are undergraduate only while others may offer master’s or doctoral programs. Reviews are opportunities to think about how best to use existing campus resources and community connections to grow into something that is an improved version of what could be.

I have been involved in external review as a department chair at two different universities. It is amazing how faculty can gain a greater sense of belonging and a desire to contribute to the department during external reviews. My consulting approach draws from the experiences I had with my own program external reviews. Departments are not islands. They cannot simply do what the faculty desire at the expense of students, nor can they believe they are immune to factors (particularly external economic ones) affecting the college or university (especially public state-funded institutions). Listening to the voices of all concerned parties is essential—students, faculty, staff, and the administration are crucial in preparing for reviews and conducting them if they are to have a chance at successfully addressing their challenges and maintaining as well as promoting their strengths.