

THREE ROLES OF THE FACULTY ASSOCIATION:
THE CHORUS, THE MESSENGER, AND THE FOOL

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William Shakespeare's philosophical Jaques, in the play *As You Like It*, observes:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.¹

As faculty at Brigham Young University—Idaho, we play many parts: teacher, scholar, advisor, curriculum developer, textbook writer, committee member, and administrator. Although our roles and duties are many, we have excellent, established resources to help us play them well. One such resource—the Faculty Association—has assisted faculty in the past by coordinating enjoyable social events and helpful pedagogical retreats. These activities have enriched our lives and widened our social interactions to include faculty in other disciplines. Yet, at this time, the Faculty Association is assuming three different roles. These three roles—chorus, messenger, and fool—benefit students by ensuring the academic quality and rigor of their education and by strengthening the credibility of this university.

The roles of chorus, messenger, and fool are modeled for us in the great literary dramas of the Classical and Renaissance periods, particularly in the works of Sophocles and Shakespeare. Drama depends upon dialogue to drive its action, and wisdom emerges from dialogue between the protagonists and the chorus, the messenger, and the fool. This wisdom has benefited generations of audience members and readers, though, ironically, the principal characters, themselves, often fail to recognize or heed it.

For example, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the chorus provides historical perspective and counsel to Creon, King of Thebes, as he confronts a crisis of state, and the messenger risks his life to deliver needed news. Yet Creon continues in his rashness to make unwise proclamations that destroy his family and jeopardize the city. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, after Lear has banished his faithful advisor, Kent, and guileless daughter Cordelia for their honest appraisal of his shallowness, only his court jester, the fool, remains to speak the truth and lead Lear from immaturity to self-understanding.

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By adopting these three supporting roles, the Faculty Association can contribute to prudent academic decisions by offering—as chorus—historical perspective and wise counsel, by gathering—as messenger—crucial information about faculty needs and academic programs, and by speaking—as fool—the truth.

SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE* AND THE CHORUS

“Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy”²—Chorus

Drama developed in the sixth century BC out of religious ceremonies in which Greeks danced and recited odes. From these choral ceremonies, Aeschylus, the first great playwright, gave a single character, the protagonist, a part separate from that of the chorus. Sophocles (the next great tragic playwright) introduced a second actor, making possible the dialogue and dynamic of character that we expect in drama, taking the chorus out of the main action but making its role a commentary on and a reflection of the plot. The chorus in ancient theater consisted of twelve to fifty people who offer for the audience a historical perspective, serve as counselors to the play's characters, and, at various times, dramatically represent townspeople, celebrants, and jury. The chorus in ancient drama is plural; its collective wisdom—not housed in any particular individual—emerges from the group. Although the chorus is not omniscient, its wisdom is greater than that of any individual character and its dramatic purposes are to contextualize events and explore their thematic meanings.

At the beginning of Sophocles' play *Antigone* (the third play in the Oedipus trilogy), the chorus celebrates the victory of the Thebans over their attackers. They praise the bravery of their defenders and offer thanks to the gods for their protection. Soon, the chorus becomes a counseling body as they are called together by Creon to witness his declaration that the body of Polynices, the traitor who led the foreign army to attack his own city, must remain unburied, without the ceremonial and religious customs of the time. Unknown to Creon, however, Antigone (who is Polynices's sister and Creon's niece) has already promised her brother Polynices that she would, upon his death, perform the necessary religious rites, so his soul would rest and not wander endlessly in the hereafter.

After providing historical perspective and serving as a counseling body, the chorus then advises the various characters for the rest of the play: not only reprimanding Antigone for being rash and passionate in her disobedience of Creon's command but also encouraging Creon to heed the recommendation of his son, Haemon, to mitigate Antigone's punishment. As Haemon points out:

It's no disgrace for a man, even a wise man, to learn many things and not to be too rigid. You've seen trees [standing] by a raging winter torrent, how many

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sway with the flood and salvage every twig, but not the stubborn—they're ripped out, roots and all. Bend or break. The same when a man is sailing: haul your sheets too taut, never give an inch, you'll capsize, and go the rest of the voyage keel up and the rowing benches under.³

This advice from the chorus proves prescient in the play, and Creon's delay in heeding it brings disaster. Unfortunately, Creon learns too late the chorus's insight that "Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy."⁴

The Faculty Association as Chorus

The Faculty Association can serve as a chorus at BYU–Idaho by offering historical perspective, counsel, and advice. When new programs are implemented and replace existing programs, people implementing the new programs are often unaware of how earlier programs or requirements had resolved previous problems. Without a body constituted to offer historical perspective, new programs often encounter, all over again, the same problems resolved earlier. For example, although working committees had highlighted the need for advanced writing in the new Foundations requirements, the final program lacked such a course, replacing it, instead, with a professional communications class. Despite the considerable efforts involved in creating and delivering that class, it was discontinued after one year in favor of reviving an advanced writing course.

The Faculty Association might have served as a chorus, providing historical perspective concerning our advanced writing requirement. The Faculty Association (consisting of faculty members who have taught here ten to 40 years) can serve as living memory for the institution. For example, when I was hired in 1992, the English Department taught English 111 as well as English 114, an advanced writing class. English 114 was soon changed to English 211 to highlight its distinct, higher level from a freshman writing course. Later, English 211 became English 311, 315, and 316 in order to frame advanced writing instruction within the context of a student's discipline. These advanced writing courses delivered solid instruction in critical reading, thinking, and writing—filling a requirement both here and at other transfer schools that had also stressed to us these necessary skills. This awareness of the history and development of advanced writing may have been helpful in developing the new Foundations requirements.

One method for creating this dynamic might be—when new programs propose to alter fundamental policies like the advanced writing requirement already mentioned, such other fundamental policies as the structure of test week, the process of faculty leaves, or CFS procedures—to hold a faculty forum where all interested faculty may offer historical perspectives, share ideas, explain how earlier situations were handled, and respond to proposals. Although committees are often organized to address these

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issues, these committees sometimes lack members who have important historical awareness and rich ideas. A faculty forum, like those in ancient city-states, would be a marketplace of ideas in which all who are interested may participate. In these forums, wisdom would likely emerge from the chorus of participating individuals.

SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE* AND THE MESSENGER

"No one wants the man who brings bad news."⁵—The Messenger

Ancient theater follows a dramatic principle called the unity of place. All the action in an ancient play occurs in only one place, usually in front of the city-state's palace. (The intent of the unity of place is to maintain an audience's suspension of disbelief by not requiring them to imagine different settings for each scene.) As a result, any action occurring in the play other than that in front of the palace has to be reported to the characters and audience by a messenger, who becomes an important actor in the play.

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In *Antigone*, when sentries assigned to guard Polynices's body realize that it has been given religious rites and burial ceremonies contrary to Creon's decree, one of the sentries, unwillingly, becomes a messenger of the bad news to Creon. Upon arriving at the palace, the sentry admits that he did not run quickly but rather hesitantly with the news to the palace. The sentry was torn, asking within himself, "Idiot, why [are you hurrying to the palace]. You're going straight to your death."⁶ But then on the other hand, the messenger realizes, "If somebody gets the news to Creon first, what's to save your life?"⁷ Divided within about delivering such undesired news, the messenger arrives fearfully at the palace.

The sentry reports, "The body—someone's just buried it, then run off...[,] sprinkled some dry dust on the flesh, given it proper rites." Yet the sentry emphasizes, "I didn't do it, I had no hand in [the burial] either, not in the plotting, not the work itself!" But someone had "to report the facts to Creon," and the lot fell to the messenger. As he says, "Condemned me, unlucky as ever, I got the prize. So here I am, against my will and yours too, well I know—no one wants the man who brings bad news."⁸ After hearing the news of the burial, Creon immediately begins to implicate the sentry in the burial plot, accusing the sentry of looking the other way in exchange for money. However, Antigone confirms later that she alone is responsible for the burial. Although the sentry may have been negligent during his watch, he had nothing to do with the planning or carrying out of Polynices's burial. Usually, as in this play, the fault or merit lies not with the messenger who delivers information. Messengers are just the carriers, who should not be praised or blamed for the messages they carry.

The Faculty Association as Messenger

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In 2004, a team of evaluators from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities included in their accreditation report six commendations and four recommendations for improvement at Brigham Young University–Idaho. Three of those recommendations were in areas directly related to the faculty: linking assessment outcomes to planning, providing means for faculty professional development, and facilitating faculty currency in academic disciplines. Faculty members need to participate in the assessment of the outcomes of their courses. These assessments can be based on national exams, essays, surveys, exit interviews, and other means. Faculty members also need to remain current and active scholars in their disciplines. This currency could be kept through researching, writing, attending conferences, and traveling to relevant academic sites, among other activities.

For the 2009 interim report, a pair of evaluators visited our campus to follow up on the previous recommendations. When the accrediting pair arrived for this evaluation, they met with administrators, faculty, deans, chairs, the past and present Faculty Association presidents, and students. All these participants were messengers of the strengths and weaknesses of our university. BYU–Idaho exceeds accreditation standards in most areas and is commended in the report for those strengths (physical facilities, student services, and advising). Nevertheless, two previously-identified weaknesses remained—assessment and professional development—and were subsequently highlighted again by the interim evaluators.

As we consider the accreditation evaluation, some may be concerned about how the evaluators received information to arrive at these commendations and recommendations. Instead of being concerned with who gave what information, we should evaluate whether or not the given commendations and recommendations accurately reflect our strengths and weaknesses. If the recommendations are accurate, they need to be addressed. If they are not, they need to be challenged with empirical evidence. How the evaluators received their information is irrelevant to the soundness of the stated commendations or recommendations.

When we play the role of messenger we need to convey information with the proper respect of our audience, in the appropriate tone for the situation, and with the acknowledgement of our own shortcomings. Yet when a problem is identified, we should collectively strive to remedy the problem, not implicate or isolate the messenger who identified it. To address the evaluators' concerns, the faculty should work to better assess the outcomes of their courses and implement—in cooperation with administrators—a release and leave policy that is conducive to needed professional development and currency in academic disciplines. If the Faculty Association plays well its role as chorus (offering historical

perspective and wise counsel), messengers delivering good news should be more frequent than those bearing bad.

SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR* AND THE FOOL

"Will anyone tell me who I am?"⁹—King Lear

Rightly, no one wants to play the fool; however, the role of the fool—as conceived in Renaissance drama—facilitates self-discovery, truth-speaking, and improvement. In Shakespeare's profound tragedy about a monarch who has grown old before he has grown wise, King Lear has divided his kingdom between two ungrateful daughters who flatter him for their inheritance but feel no love toward their father. Ironically, he leaves his third daughter, Cordelia, banished for understating her expression of sincere love.

The great tragedy depicts Lear's growth from foolishness to wisdom. Lear's guides in his journey of self-discovery are his faithful servant Kent and his court jester, the fool. Kent and Cordelia are banished for their blunt rebuke of the King's rashness, so Kent must return in disguise in order to watch over and help the King recognize his mistakes. Unlike Kent, the fool is tolerated by the King, for he is merely a fool: He has no pretense to power or position. Because the fool is non-threatening, he—unlike other advisers, counselors, and princes—can speak the truth to the King, telling him what he needs to hear, though others are too afraid to speak it. For instance, when the King asks, "Will anyone tell me who I am?" the fool answers that Lear has given so little thought to his psychological and intellectual development that he is merely a "shadow" of a man.¹⁰

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The Faculty Association as Fool

Even though individual faculty members may not want to play the fool, the Faculty Association can fill this role. The Faculty Association can gather information and evaluations about programs and initiatives and convey this information in a way that other administrators, program directors, deans, and chairs—because of their positions and duties—cannot. For a variety of reasons, such as friendship, ambition, fear, or loyalty, people in administrative positions sometimes find it difficult to deliver bad news. They are quite motivated, however, to deliver good news.

In the role of the fool, the Faculty Association can create surveys and hold forums to find out the truth about what is and is not working with regard to midterm grades, faculty leaves, the learning model, Foundations classes and requirements, student advising, test week, I-learn, and administrative effectiveness. This information can be gathered and reported upon, so strengths can be acknowledged and celebrated and weaknesses can be identified and addressed. The institution benefits

when faculty members have a forum through which they may offer views without concern for promotions, social ramifications, or subtle retribution. Of course, faculty comments should always be professional, reasonable, and tempered by empathy for the roles of administrators.

SHAKESPEARE'S *HENRY V* AND THE FACULTY ASSOCIATION

"A little touch of Harry in the night"¹¹—*Henry V*

In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the English army, with "lank-lean cheeks" and war-worn coats, camps outside Agincourt in 1415 awaiting the coming battle during the Hundred Years' war. In the third hour of the "drowsy morning," the confident French chide the night away, while the "poor condemned English. . . sit patiently, and inly ruminat[e] the morning's danger." Henry V, the "royal captain of this ruined [English] band," walks from "watch to watch, from tent to tent," and "visits all his host, / Bids them good morrow with a modest smile, / And calls them brothers, friends, and countrymen," providing "A little touch of Harry in the night."¹² After sending his officers to summon the princes to wait at his tent, Henry V borrows someone else's cloak to wander, unrecognized and unknown, among his tired men as he and his "bosom debate awhile."¹³

Through his disguised wanderings, Henry V discovers, unsurprisingly, that his men are fearful of the coming battle and of the death that might befall them. However, the men also reveal that although they themselves may die in this battle and lie abandoned on the cold, French soil, they are embittered by the belief that the King, if captured, will merely be ransomed and return unscathed to their fern-covered homeland. Only through his disguised wanderings does the King learn the true thoughts of his men, which—because of the power and ceremony of his position—are quite different from the flattery they offer in his presence. Since in *Henry V*, no one plays the roles of chorus, messenger, or fool, Henry must find out through subterfuge the thoughts of his army about the campaign. Instead, if Henry V had placed around him those charged to play the roles of chorus, messenger, and fool, deception would have been unnecessary for him to learn the truth. The BYU–Idaho Faculty Association can play these roles and provide—explicitly and overtly—necessary information upon which decisions can be based.

Certainly, there are other roles beside chorus, messenger, and fool that a Faculty Association can and has played here at BYU–Idaho. In the past, it has sponsored faculty outings, temple trips, and banquets. Faculty Association sponsorship of such activities enriches campus life, but sponsoring such activities is not as crucial to continual academic improvement for the benefit of our students as filling the roles of chorus (providing historical perspective and counsel), messenger (conveying information from and to the faculty), and fool (speaking, without regard

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for ambition or fear, the truth). In carrying out these dramatic roles, the Faculty Association can promote wise decisions and strengthen academics at Brigham Young University–Idaho. ∞

NOTES

- 1 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, act 2, sc. 7, lines 139-142.
- 2 Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 795-803.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid, line 1466.
- 5 Ibid, line 313.
- 6 Ibid, line 244.
- 7 Ibid, lines 256-257.
- 8 Ibid, lines 289-313.
- 9 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, act 1, sc.4, line 230.
- 10 Ibid, lines 230-231.
- 11 William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, act 4, sc. 1, lines 16-22, 47.
- 12 Ibid, line 47.
- 13 Ibid, line 31.