

The Chronicle of Higher Education Administrators and Professors Find Listening Is a Survival Skill August 5, 2012

By Peter Schmidt

Every spring, Endicott College's administrators and faculty members pick up paintbrushes and spend a day touching up the place. The event marks how they were able to rescue their once-struggling private college by learning to work together.

Located on the Massachusetts shore, about 20 miles north of Boston, Endicott enrolls about 2,300 undergraduate students and 2,400 graduate students in the liberal arts and in such professional programs as business, education, hospitality management, interior design, and nursing. But it used to be about the last place one would expect to stand out for its collaborative governance, as it did this year in *The Chronicle's* fifth annual Great Colleges to Work For survey of college employees.



Kelvin Ma for The Chronicle

Richard Wylie (right), president of Endicott College, with Gabrielle Watling, an English professor, and James Perry, a faculty-union officer: An atmosphere of “built-in trust” prevails, the president says.

Back in the mid-1980s, relations between Endicott and its employees were colored by tension, distrust, and fear. The institution—then a two-year women's college—was in deep trouble, with no endowment, an operating deficit, a shrinking enrollment, deteriorating buildings, and a "For Sale" listing for the entire college. The college's administration and its unionized faculty hammered out decisions related to faculty working conditions in periodic, hardball contract talks. There was a house divided, ready to fall.

Richard E. Wylie, who has been the college's president since 1987, recalls that in his first years in office, his talks with the faculty followed a pattern: "I would bring my lawyer in. The union would bring its lawyer in." Helping to keep lawyers busy, the college's faculty members filed about 10 grievances a year citing alleged contract violations and other complaints.

The college managed to make one change crucial to its survival: earning four-year status, in 1988. In pushing through that academic reorganization, Mr. Wylie made, and kept, a pledge to faculty members that their jobs would remain safe. The good will earned as a result enabled him to persuade the faculty union, the Endicott Faculty Association, to accept a proposal to overhaul the process by which the two sides negotiated.

Rather than determining faculty working conditions almost solely through periodic contract talks brokered by their respective lawyers, they would directly engage in "impact bargaining"—talks held

outside the formal contract-negotiation process—as needed to deal with their college's crisis. The resulting letters of agreement could take effect immediately and be incorporated into the contracts later, when they were renewed.

With the help of an adviser from the National Labor Relations Board, the administration and faculty members developed a series of protocols for conducting impact-bargaining sessions.

"There was built-in trust," Mr. Wylie says. "We made a commitment to respect and work closely with them, and they made that same commitment to us."

Endicott College staged its first Paint Day during the height of its financial crisis, as a way to get all of its employees to pitch in on badly needed maintenance that it could not afford. The transformation it has undergone since those dark days is far more than cosmetic.

The college's faculty members have filed a total of just two faculty grievances over the past 16 years. Contract negotiations tend to go smoothly, helped along by the fact that many changes in the labor agreement have already been decided in impact-bargaining sessions.

When it comes to the faculty union's discussions with the administration, "the dialogue is always there. There is no apprehension or anything of that nature," says James A. Perry, an assistant professor of hospitality management and vice president of the faculty union, which is affiliated with the National Education Association.

The college's administration frequently solicits input from its more than 350 academic staff members. It holds monthly and annual meetings open to all of its employees, and the college pulled employees into brainstorming sessions when it was developing its latest 10-year strategic plan. There are no edicts where the president says, "This is the way it has to go," Mr. Perry says. "He is very much open for each of the schools to look at ways in which they can go in their own direction."

The college, which went coed in 1994, now annually receives about 4,000 applications for the 600 seats in each entering freshman class. Its financial picture has turned around, and its buildings have been restored to good-enough shape that Paint Day remains on its calendar mainly as a team-building exercise.

Other colleges that rated well for collaborative governance in the *Chronicle* survey share Endicott's focus on open communication.

The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, for example, holds training programs for department chairs and associate deans, many of whom came from faculty positions, partly to teach them how to work well with their employees and the university's academic-employee unions.

"It is important to us that our faculty leaders operate both effectively and in a collegial way," says Christina B. Whitman, the campus's vice provost for academic and faculty affairs.

Somerset Community College, in Kentucky, has established committees and councils to give faculty and staff a say in institutional affairs. In addition, top administrators there have embraced a concept called "fishbowl," in which they invite employees to anonymously place questions in a fishbowl or some other container and keep meetings going until they have fielded each one.

"People can ask anything they want" without their questions' being filtered, says Robert T. Spencer, an associate professor of English, who recently stepped down as chairman of Somerset's faculty. On the whole, he says, the college offers "many structured opportunities for people to say what is on their mind."