

## **Institutional theory in college restructuring: myth or reality?**

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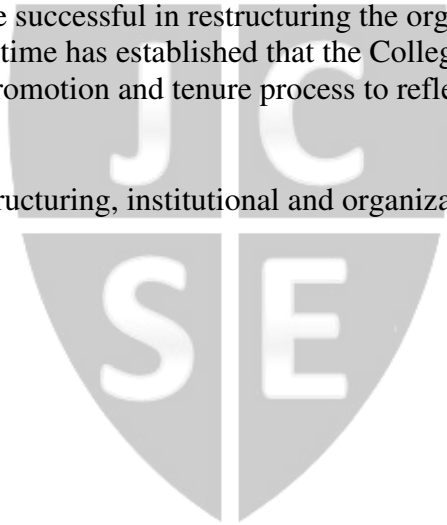
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### **Abstract**

In response to external pressure for change, the subject university engaged in major restructuring activities during the mid to late 1990's. As predicted by organizational theory, faculty reacted to the restructuring in order to define the conditions and methods of their work and to legitimate their professional autonomy. Although this university and college were successful in restructuring the organizational chart and the curriculum, the passage of time has established that the College of Business was not successful in revising its promotion and tenure process to reflect college-wide restructuring initiatives.

Keywords: university restructuring, institutional and organizational theories



An article in Spectrum [1] describes institutional theory and its predictions for university administrative behavior during restructuring in higher education. The article reports events at one state comprehensive university and the success of administrators in securing resources in the state budgeting process.

In a subsequent report [2] the authors of the Spectrum article reviewed faculty behavior during the same reorganization. The scope of this latter report was not only the restructuring process at the subject university, but also the reorganization of a significant subunit of the university, its College of Business (COB). In the following article, after the passage of time, it is possible to evaluate whether the restructuring at the COB constituted a real change or served merely as “myth and ceremony” as proposed by institutional theory.

## **Applying Institutional Theory**

### **How does institutional theory apply?**

University administrators and elected officials seek legitimacy with constituents. One way to gain legitimacy is for these parties to engage in self-improvement to demonstrate their willingness to serve the public’s needs. Universities and other institutions that devise a history of self-improvement through the restructuring process are expected to be rewarded more than those institutions that neglect the process [1].

To demonstrate their willingness to respond to the needs of the public, universities, like other organizations, can be expected to engage in both “onstage” and “offstage” activities. From the university’s perspective, in its quest for legitimacy, the onstage actions take the form of publicized restructuring events.

Offstage activities among administrators, faculty and students, on the other hand, help the organization to conduct its daily operations. These routine actions are for the benefit of the organization and are usually not observed by the state or the general public. For example, classes are conducted, and students and faculty are evaluated.

### **What does institutional theory predict?**

DiMaggio and Powell [3, p. 150] describe three processes—coercive, mimetic, and normative—to help explain the structure of institutions. The coercive process occurs when external constituents exert pressure on organizations to adopt bureaucratic practices. The mimetic process results in an organization adopting widely used organizational practices to demonstrate that the organization resembles successful peers in documentable ways. Finally, the normative process manifests itself when key organizational members react to define the conditions and methods of their work so as to establish a common philosophy and to legitimate professional autonomy.

According to Jaschik (2010) [4], news coverage about higher education is most often from the consumer’s point of view. Topics of interest include admission rates, costs and other practical issues. In response to concerns expressed by constituents, elected officials have introduced legislation with the goal of pressuring universities into managing their resources more efficiently.

Institutional theory predicts that universities will respond to such coercion by engaging in visible activities, such as restructuring and streamlining operations. Restructuring plans at universities mimic many of the visible actions already taken by many businesses during the early part of the 1990's. For example, the subject university had reported that, during the restructuring process, it would

- realign academic objectives,
- reengineer administrative and support services,
- reshape resource allocation and
- regain the ability to deploy faculty effort to meet the university's mission.

The university's success in responding to demands for change by the state legislature was announced "on stage" in the press in the local newspaper [5, Daily News-Record 6/16/94]. The degree to which the university reacted to demands by the legislature resulted in its being awarded an increase in its funding during a time when total funding for higher education in the Commonwealth of Virginia had declined:

[The university] is already ahead of the state's other institutions. The state legislature in 1993 voted an increase of \$2.9 million in funding [for the university] for the 1994-1995 academic year, while at the same time slashing higher education funding statewide by about \$15 million. ... Changes already begun at [the subject university] are being encouraged at other state schools.

This latter comment is another example of the mimetic process predicted by DiMaggio and Powell [3, p. 150].

### **Restructuring Details**

In the summer of 1995 the university announced that it had reviewed six disciplines under an extensive program review and fifteen more programs would be reviewed in the 1995-1996 academic year. The university continues to review all academic programs on a revolving basis in a systematic way that involves internal and external reviewers, on-campus visits and a formal reporting process. These periodic reviews are coordinated by the Office for Academic Affairs [8, p. 77, 1/7/2005].

This system of review is conducted in addition to other formal accreditation procedures. In addition, one day in February each year is reserved as "Assessment Day." The university cancels classes for the day and encourages its programs to engage in assessment of both students and programs.

Another enduring, major change resulted from the introduction of a College of Applied Sciences that became operational in a state-of-the art building that now dominates the campus skyline. This building has provided the cornerstone for the development of an entire new campus area.

Although a "two track system" of teaching and research faculty did not progress beyond the discussion phase, a teaching contract known as a "renewable term contract" (RTA) was created by the university's administration. They argued that the flexibility inherent in this appointment would enable the university to respond to needs to change its

staffing. In the accounting program of the subject COB, the RTAs are non-PhDs with fewer research responsibilities, a greater teaching load, and lower annual salaries. In all departments RTAs provide the flexibility the university might require when shifting its resources.

According to the Faculty Handbook [8, 1/7/2005, p. 33]

Renewable-term appointments (RTAs) are intended to attract faculty members of distinction to meet long-term staffing needs and to provide appointees with a degree of job security while retaining the ability to shift staffing resources as the needs of programs fluctuate. ... RTA faculty members are not candidates for tenure and cannot be awarded tenure.

### **What were some of the “offstage” behaviors?**

Having been successful in its quest for legitimacy with legislators and the public, institutional theory predicts that the university’s administration will then seek the legitimacy of its innovations with its faculty. This phase of the restructuring activity may be described as the normative stage of the organizational process.

During its daily operations, administrators and faculties engage in certain “offstage” behaviors that are not usually observed by the state or the general public. For example, classes are conducted, committee meetings are held, and students and faculty are evaluated.

Institutions that have undergone change, such as a restructuring, achieve organizational control when the members of the organization have internalized newly-defined objectives, and those goals are reflected in performance evaluations. University administration attempted to convince the faculty of the value of the reorganization through education.

In a memorandum to faculty and staff dated August 30, 1993, [9] the vice president of academic affairs encouraged faculty to go beyond the newspaper accounts (onstage) and read reserved copies placed in the library (offstage). The materials included in the package for faculty review were:

- “The Case for Change,” also known as “The U21 Report,” Commission on the University of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (1989);
- “The Continuum of Education: Response to House Joint Resolution No. 211, Appropriations Act Item 151, House Joint Resolution No. 142,” State Council of Higher Education (November 10, 1992); and
- “Change and Improvement in Virginia Higher Education: A Preliminary Report to the Governor and General Assembly,” also known as “The Restructuring Paper,” State Council of Higher Education (January 12, 1993).

The prepared texts of the president’s messages to faculty during the April 1994 and August 1994 open faculty meetings listed ways the university had accomplished and would accomplish a more effective application of the human, financial and capital

resources of the university. In this way administration was integrating the restructuring into the internal culture by incorporating it into the institutional history of the organization. According to Ritti & Silver [6, p. 25], the history, once created, becomes part of the stock of things taken for granted with the prevailing organizational culture.

In regards to performance evaluation, the faculty senate approved the concept of a merit pay system on September 8, 1994. On June 7, 1995, a memorandum was issued to instructional faculty reporting that development of the new merit pay program would be guided by the faculty subcommittee on the Roles, Responsibilities and Rewards Committee. The committee was composed of several administrative and faculty personnel. Technical assistance was provided by an outside consulting firm that has worked with some of the country's leading universities in the development of human resource and compensation. Merit pay discussion meetings were held during that summer.

The subject university continues to operate under a system of annual merit pay [8, p. 70, 7/1/2009]:

Funds disbursed by the commonwealth to the university for annual salary adjustments are to be allocated principally on the basis of performance (merit). Annual adjustments in the salaries of faculty members are not an entitlement but rather reflect continued meaningful contributions in the three areas of expected faculty member performance (i.e. for an instructional faculty member, teaching scholarship and service). This system of salary adjustment is intended to encourage all faculty members toward continuous performance improvement.

### **Faculty Activism**

During the normative phase of the restructuring process, administration had encountered intense faculty resistance. The difficulty administrators faced in general at this time is captured in the following press comment by State Education Secretary Beverly H. Sgro:

Many of the institutions have really given their presidents and leaders a difficult time. Change is difficult in the academic arena. The presidents have had considerable pressure. [5, Daily News-Record, 11/13/1994]

The proposed changes at the university were at odds with some aspects of the internal culture. Some faculty members reacted strongly to try to define the conditions and methods of their work and to establish a common philosophy and professional autonomy. One proposal to restructure the liberal studies core threatened the university's hallmark, as well as the faculty teaching in those areas.

In December 1993, 264 of 531 full-time faculty members voted for a moratorium on restructuring and a review of faculty governance. This referendum, requiring approval of 50% of the faculty (not 50% of the votes cast) failed by two votes. However, in a conciliatory move, the president offered faculty two positions on a new restructuring commission. These faculty members worked with the Board of Visitors on a newly designed Governance Committee, but later resigned in protest.

In January 1995, a “massive academic shake-up” was announced. Two colleges, Letters and Sciences and Communication and the Arts, would be merged into a new college. The Physics Department was to be eliminated as part of the continuing restructuring effort. The announced purpose for the elimination of the Physics Department was to continue the university’s record of academic success and efficiency. Some faculty members were skeptical that the termination of the Physics Department had more to do with activism by some members in that department rather than efficiency. While administration pointed to the fact the department graduated a handful of majors each year, the Physics Department reported, among other facts, in a paid advertisement in Daily News-Record [5, 2/17/95] that it graduated more physics majors than 73% of the colleges and universities in the U.S. that grant B.S. degrees in physics. The elimination of the Physics Department would later be rescinded.

The faculty senate passed a resolution to carry out a referendum to determine whether or not they had confidence in the president’s ability to responsibly lead the university. The vote was 197 yes; 305 no. A new association was organized calling itself Faculty for Responsible Change (FRC). The viewpoint of the FRC included the tenet that professors are professionals who are entitled by virtue of their education and experience to have a say in the educational decisions of the university. Their assertion is another example of the normative process predicted by DiMaggio and Powell [3, p. 150].

Offstage behaviors became onstage behaviors through a legal suit and an active discourse in the editorial section of the local newspaper, the school newspaper, as well as the university electronic bulletin board. An article in the Daily News-Record [5, 5/1/95] summed up the atmosphere:

Students protesting. Professors voting no confidence in the university leadership. Administrators forced to defend unpopular actions. Within the last four months, all these have become familiar images around the [university] campus.

Certain members of the FRC filed a lawsuit against the university’s Board of Visitors, citing breach of contract and other complaints. The suit focused on the administration’s lack of faculty consultation about eliminating the Physics Department. This association was originally formed by approximately twenty faculty—all of whom had been selected by faculty peers as either Distinguished Teachers or Madison Scholars or both.

The suit sought no money other than costs. It asked that the court order the Board of Visitors to rescind the merger of the College of Letters and Sciences with the College of Communications and the Arts, the elimination of the position of dean of that college, and the elimination of the ten faculty positions in the Physics Department. The judicial action was dismissed on the basis of “sovereign immunity,” a legal doctrine that protects state bodies from being sued for performing their duties, and the judge’s decision that the university handbook did not necessitate faculty involvement in certain decisions.

A successive Faculty Handbook approved by the Board of Visitors on January 7, 2005[8], explicitly includes the following caveat from the Rector (p. 8):

Please note that while the Faculty Handbook is designed to outline the duties, rights and responsibilities of faculty members, it does not contain all of the

university's policies and procedures. And while it will serve as a useful guide to the relationship between the faculty member and the university, it is not to be considered as part of the university's contractual agreement with individual faculty members.

The restructuring of the Liberal Studies Core into the General Studies Program may have been one of the greatest sources of contention among faculty. And despite the obvious turmoil, faculty remained committed to their students and professional responsibilities throughout the restructuring process.

In September 1999, a new president of the university was inaugurated. Although there was a national search committee, an internal candidate prevailed. The former president was named "chancellor." Under the new president the university has continued to grow in numbers of students, programs, and national reputation. As the university has grown and faculty members have retired, the turmoil has faded from the university's collective memory.

### **Restructuring of the College of Business**

One significant academic unit, the College of Business (COB), escaped reorganization until late in the restructuring process. In 1996, a new dean, who had been promoted from within the COB, led the restructuring effort. The COB administration held a college-wide election in which two teams of faculty were elected. Both teams were charged with conducting independent and parallel reviews of the organizational structure of the college and making recommendations to the Leadership Council for their final action. Leadership Council is a body made up of administrators and department heads (now called program heads) within the COB.

The dean's charge to the restructuring committees explained that the recommendation should

- facilitate the delivery of an integrated core curriculum while maintaining the integrity of majors and the identity of the disciplines
- utilize existing COB resources most effectively and
- allow the COB to undertake new initiatives related to active student learning and student development.

The dimensions of the charge and the announcement reflected the university's publicized objectives in its overall restructuring efforts during the earlier 1990's, including realigning academic objectives, reengineering administrative and support services, reshaping resource allocation and deploying faculty to meet the university's mission. These stated objectives clearly reflect constituents' preferences for universities that prepare students with a meaningful curriculum and that use current resources effectively.

The elected task forces at the COB worked intensively for two months, and then presented their recommendations in college-wide faculty meetings. The Leadership Council at the COB then drafted a final structure, incorporating many elements of the

recommendations and some ideas of their own. The resulting structure was clearly designed to support the dean's first objective, i.e. a more integrated business core curriculum.

### **Restructuring Details**

Current program areas at the COB are the traditional business disciplines and Economics, as well as interdisciplinary programs, including international studies, the MBA program, and the business core. As a result of the restructuring of the last decade, courses in the business core have been prefixed as "COB" classes rather than offerings from the individual disciplines. For example, Accounting 241, a traditional foundation course in Principles of Accounting required of all business majors, is now identified as "COB 241" rather than "ACTG 241." These core courses are now managed by a director of the business core in addition to the director of the accounting program. Courses at the freshmen and sophomore level have been redesigned to prepare students for an integrated junior level experience in which a team of four faculty members from individual business disciplines deliver a twelve-hour course. The integrated experience has become the hallmark of the COB.

Under the original restructuring of the COB, most faculty members would have reported to multiple directors. One of the perceived benefits of empowering program directors, such as the MBA Director or the International Business Program Director, is that faculty who teach in these service areas and whose efforts are not valued by a specific discipline could be rewarded for their efforts. Program heads, such as the MBA director, would have been empowered to get things done directly with faculty. It was hoped that the reward system would encourage and foster interdisciplinary work.

The restructured COB therefore worked to implement a reward system that would support the integrated curriculum. An evaluation task force, made up of the appointment of some faculty from each of the two original restructuring task forces, spent more than one year drafting and defending an evaluation plan. Its charge was to provide for both discipline/organizational unit input and a college-wide perspective concerning each faculty member's annual performance plan and promotion and tenure evaluation. The process designed by that committee for recommendation during the promotion and tenure decision is depicted in Figure 1. Program research evaluation committees would provide an evaluation of the faculty member's research accomplishments using departmental criteria to the COB personnel advisory committee (PAC). The COB PAC would evaluate teaching and service using college-wide criteria and provide an overall recommendation directly to the dean.

### **The COB Restructuring: Myth or Reality?**

Meyer and Rowan [7, p. 352] have proposed that procedures play a ritualistic role in such poorly structured settings as universities, which are groping to find, conform to, and demonstrate for their constituents some form of rationality in order to gain legitimacy. They theorize that organizations tend to avoid massive dysfunction by "decoupling" their external image systems from backstage operating processes. This decoupling process, in turn, relies on both societal and organizational actors functioning



in an atmosphere of confidence and good faith and not taking the institutionalized structures too seriously.

By revising the evaluation process to actually reflect the new structure, the COB's offstage behavior reflected both the university's and COB's onstage behavior. The restructuring at the COB therefore provided an interesting case study in organizational behavior to observe whether the internal evaluation process would eventually become "decoupled" from the external image.

A college-wide personnel advisory committee for the College of Business (PAC) was instituted as a result of the restructuring. Prior to the restructuring, faculty members had been evaluated for recommendation for promotion and tenure solely at the departmental level and there were no COB or university-wide PACs operating. A working document setting forth college-wide criteria for promotion and tenure was drafted by the first college-wide promotion and tenure committee during 1998-1999. The committee presented criteria (for research, teaching and service) to the faculty during May 1999. The new criteria were revised and submitted to a college-wide faculty vote in April 2000. However, many faculty resisted the plan that would redirect two-thirds of the evaluation process (teaching and service components) for promotion and tenure to the college-wide committee.

During Fall Semester 1999, the college-wide PAC began administering the criteria under a two-tiered format to ease the transition from a departmental to a college-wide evaluation system for promotion and tenure. Under the two-tiered format, COB candidates had the choice of submitting their promotion and/or tenure packages for evaluation by either the historical departmental promotion and tenure committee or the new college-wide promotion and tenure committee that had resulted from the restructuring activities. The process of promotion and tenure decisions by a college-wide PAC was not entirely settled at this time because there was some discussion about whether the language of the faculty handbook would require further adjustment before the changes could be made permanent. Many faculty members had voiced dissent for the new evaluation process at COB meetings.

Meyer and Rowan [7] have proposed that organizations like universities usually decouple their external image systems from backstage operating processes. If the evaluation plan at the COB continued through the full implementation stage, then the COB's reorganization would provide not merely a new face for the public. Administration and faculty would have actually internalized the process, linking performance and evaluation reports to the goals announced in the university's restructuring initiatives. This coupling of goals announced to the public in the restructuring process and internal performance evaluation would be an extraordinary accomplishment in institutional behavior.

### **Was the change in promotion and tenure real or part of the "myth and ceremony" of the restructuring process at the COB?**

Institutional theory supports the general outcome that an institution will not make significant changes in its structure, but rather will create the illusion of change to outside constituents in order to gain legitimacy. At the time of the restructuring of its COB, the subject university, like most other state-sponsored universities, was under pressure by

legislative constituents to restructure their operations to gain efficiencies during a period of budgetary distress.

The COB adopted not only a real change in its organizational structure and curriculum, but also a proposed change in its evaluation process to support the integrated curriculum. Prior to the COB's restructuring, evaluation of faculty members by other faculty for promotion and tenure at the subject university had been derived only at the departmental-level PAC. There was not then-- nor is there now-- a university-level PAC. When fully operational, the COB PAC would have removed the evaluation of teaching and service from the departmental level PACs. However, faculty and administration within the larger institution of the university working with several key players from the COB would act to destabilize this change in the process of updating the university's Faculty Handbook.

### **The Role of the Faculty Handbook**

The university-level Faculty Handbook had not been updated at a pace to keep up with the university's overall restructuring efforts. When the process was eventually undertaken, the editors of the revised handbook did not incorporate language to accommodate and legitimate the changes that were in transition at the COB. As a result, the COB was required to modify its newly-developed evaluation process to conform to the language of the updated faculty handbook.

The Faculty Handbook approved on January 7, 2005[8], reports the history of this change (p. 79)

The [university's] Handbook has been prepared by university faculty members and administration and reviewed and approved by the board of visitors. The handbook is designed to be a source of information for faculty members about their employment at the university. The 2001 Faculty Handbook was drafted by a Faculty Handbook Task Force that was formed in the fall of 1999. It represented a new creation that replaced the 1994-95 Faculty Handbook.

The term in question in the handbook was "academic unit." An academic unit is defined as a departmental unit or its functional equivalent. Each academic unit had an "Academic Unit Personnel Advisory Committee." Because the term "academic unit" controlled the evaluation and promotion procedures in the university handbook, the college-wide PAC did not conform to the language used in the handbook. As a result, the rewriting of the Faculty Handbook negated the role of the COB PAC; and this facet of the restructuring joined the realm of myth-making as predicted by institutional theory.

The question remains whether the handbook should have reflected the vocabulary changes adopted in the restructuring or whether the restructuring should have conformed to the outdated handbook. However, no one has protested the reversion to the historical evaluation process, and the college-wide evaluation process joins the ranks of activities that may be categorized by organizational theorists as "myth and ceremony." Thus, after one year spent developing college-wide criteria for promotion and tenure and two years of transition in which both the college-wide and departmental PACs had been offered as

alternatives for evaluation to faculty candidates for promotion and/or tenure, the departmental unit regained sole authority for making recommendations to the dean.

The college-wide PAC born as a result of the restructuring process now acts as an overall advisory committee to the dean at his direction, and program PACs have full authority to make recommendations directly to the dean for faculty teaching in their programs. There continues to be no level of faculty evaluation by other faculty beyond the departmental level, such as a university-level PAC. Faculty delivering courses prefixed as “COB” business core courses are evaluated by the directors of the discipline-specific programs. For example, only the Director of the School of Accounting evaluates faculty performance in Principles of Accounting. Accounting faculty members teaching in the International Business Program may be evaluated by the International Business Program Director, but she controls no resources to reward faculty directly for their performance.

### Summary

An earlier article published in *Spectrum* [1] described the administrative success of one university in securing increased funding by demonstrating its willingness to meet the public’s demands through restructuring. Institutional theory suggests that in the last phase of restructuring, the normative phase, faculty will react to protect their professional autonomy with increased activism.

This article describes activism by the general faculty as a response to restructuring. As predicted by institutional theory, during the normative phase of the restructuring, many faculty members resisted the restructuring process. The results at this university were impacted by a powerful, entrenched university administration, a work environment with no organized labor union, and ultimately by a legal system that refused to interfere with the university’s restructuring process.

This article also describes restructuring activity at the COB and the failed attempt to establish a college-wide PAC in lieu of individual departmental PACs. In this case, the offstage behavior of faculty in their evaluation activities ultimately did not support the onstage activity. In the normative phase of the institutional restructuring, faculty failed to internalize the restructured organization into the evaluation procedure. The PAC created under the restructuring is better described as “myth” than “reality.”

The Faculty Handbook played an important role during the restructuring process. On the one hand it did not provide a basis for successful judicial action by certain faculty challenging the university administration. However, on the other hand, the handbook did serve as a tool to stifle changes in the evaluation process at the COB.

The importance of the handbook in the university community has been embraced since its revision in 2001. Currently, the Speaker of the Faculty Senate describes the ongoing revision [8, 2009, p. 12]:

The new mechanism put in place at this institution in 2001 for a dynamic and living handbook will continue into the future... We have embraced a truly collaborative process that opens doors of communication and keeps the stakeholders in this institution intimately involved in the process of refining and illuminating the relationship between the faculty and the university.

Such statements are examples of ongoing, on-stage activities.

### **Limitations of this Case Study**

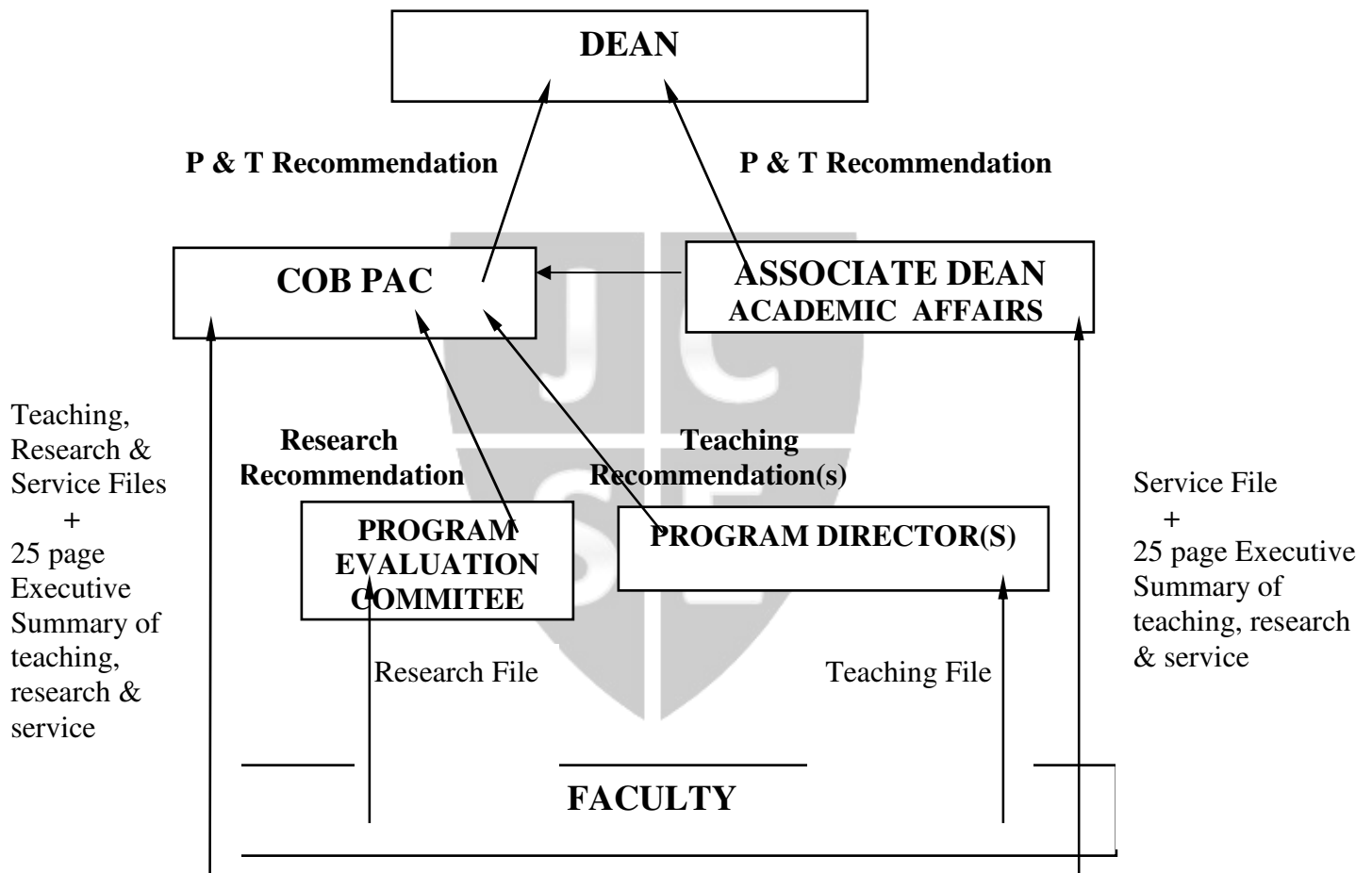
While relating these organizational events, the authors have tried to remain objective. However, as faculty members, they were parties to the restructuring efforts. All three authors were faculty members at the COB at the time of the restructuring. One of the authors served on both the faculty senate and the COB elected restructuring committee. Two of the authors served on the college-wide PAC during its first three years of operation. Although these positions provided the opportunity to bear witness to these events, the participants are admittedly less than independent of them. Because restructuring affected faculty members at the subject university to differing degrees, there are surely administrative and faculty evaluations of the restructuring effort and its outcomes that may differ from the authors' perspectives and report.

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**Figure 1 - the structure and process for promotion and tenure**



Source: Memo to Faculty from COB Personnel Action Committee, April 1999