E-Mail as the Modern SOS: Enlisting Cyber Allies in a "Save Our Undergraduate Program" Campaign

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Social workers' ambivalence about computer technologies has limited the application of new tools to social action projects. An interactionist framework for appraising the utility and morality of technological applications is presented. Additionally, a natural history of how e-mail was used as a "pragmatic technology" to enlist "cyber allies" in response to the threatened closure of an undergraduate social work program is narrated. The social and political context for computer-mediated community organizing is described, and the major components of the improvised change process (guiding conceptions, goals, intervention tools, assessment procedures, evaluation) are reviewed. Post-crisis interpretations of how members of a virtual social network acted together to save the program, and lessons for social work educators and practitioners open to the practical and responsible use of the internet are offered.

Social work educators and practitioners differ from psychologists and other human service professionals. Social workers appreciate that they best actualize imagined futures not by their individual effort but by their collective effort (Forte, 2002). Ideas like "mutual aid," "strength in numbers," "grass roots organizing," "indigenous leaders," and "social support" are familiar to these public problem solvers (Lee, 2000). New technologies, however, are radically changing the ways that educators and practitioners think about community practice and connect people to each other for the purpose of personal and social reconstruction (Wellman & Hampton, 1999).

Will these technologies help or hinder? Social workers are uncertain about the cultural changes likely to follow their widespread adoption. Technological pessimists anticipate that the new and "hyper" technologies (and their control by large corporations) will bring about the loss of client confidentiality, the wasteful expenditure of scarce resources on equipment, the destruction of the local community fabric, the cluttering of the environment with obsolete gadgets, and the disintegration of narratives that sustain the profession (Kreuger, 1997; Kreuger & Stretch, 2000a). Some optimists look forward to the use of the Internet and other new communication tools as ways to invigorate local and global activists (Gonchar & Adams, 2000). Other futurists expect that new technologies will improve the societies that use them (Raymond, Ginsberg, & Gohagan, 1998). Information technologies, for example, might make possible effective undergraduate distance education and web-based instruction, efficient and low-cost staff development and professional networking, and versatile information management in varied social work agencies. Vernon and Lynch (2000) imagine social work practitioners using their homes as offices, communicating with clients by two-way video transmissions, charging for services with E-money, and increasing their professional knowledge on-line.

Pragmatist philosophers propose a conceptualization of technology that can help us replace ambivalence and uncertainty about technological change with purposefulness

(Kreuger & Stretch, 2000b). John Dewey presented one of the most sophisticated statements of this position (Hickman, 1999), a statement influenced probably by his work with Jane Addams at Hull House (Forte, 2003). Dewey's service to the poor and newly arrived immigrants taught him that technological changes may displace and disorient people, but these changes also offer new ways of promoting cooperation and communication. Dewey believed, like many contemporary interactionist theorists and social workers, in "evolutionary naturalism." This is the doctrine that humans "are biological organisms who live their lives interacting with, and also evolving within the rest of nature" (Hickman, 1999, p. 101). Humans meet environmental challenges by using various tools: both tangible objects and intangible equipment. The human facility with languages, for example, is the prized and indispensable tool, and this facility differentiates us from all organisms. Technology, Dewey argued in line with his ecosystems philosophy, according to Hickman (1999, p.109) that technology is "the invention, development, and use of tools of all sorts to resolve problematic situations."

Pragmatists and social workers committed to pragmatism should not separate moral judgments about technology from the application of the technology. A new form of technology, for instance, can be used to create either good or bad social systems. The morality of the application depends on human choice and action, and humans can choose to use technology wisely. "Pragmatic technology" is the name for this approach to using technology: an approach that requires technology users to meet standards associated with high quality person-environment transactions (Hickman, 1990, 1999). Specifically, intelligent and responsible technology users solicit feedback from all parties affected by the technology, check continually the relation of means to ends, implement their designs for tool use in a flexible and open-minded way, support democratic processes, and use technology to develop the talents and interests of all members of the relevant communities

This case study offers a reflective narrative of how taken-for-granted skills with tools for computer-mediated communication became a pragmatic technology. This technology helped me and my colleagues organize a community to resist an attempt to close the undergraduate social work program at which I then worked. Program defenders were mobilized by a common purpose, perspective, and set of emotions. E-mail served as the means for delivering a modern SOS. Our e-mail correspondences became the contemporary equivalent of the international code that sailors and pilots used to signal distress. The rest of this account details how pragmatic technology was use to communicate our plight and to enlist numerous "cyber allies" in a campaign to influence administrative decision makers. Although the data were collected from the public domain and on-the-record conversations, names and places have been disguised. The story telling was inspired partially by Denzin's narratives (1988, 1995) about resistance to changes in the employee assistance program at a Midwestern university and his conception (2003) of a critical social work. The elements of the story are organized in a form developed by researchers committed to qualitative, interactionist, and processual case studies (Abbott, 1997; Fishman, 1999; Gilgun, 1994).

The Problematic Situation: A Thick Description

On Monday, April 24, 2000, a chief administrator of a college where I once worked announced his intentions to meet with the faculty the next day. Tuesday afternoon, faculty responded to the summons and listened to a 90-minute presentation about the administration's achievements in the areas of

fund raising and student recruitment, about the changing profile of students (younger, higher SAT scores, more full time, more residential, more "traditional"), about ambitious and visionary building plans, and about the college's future. In slides and words, the administrator elaborated on his core message of rapid and visionary transformation. All were asked to assist him in transforming the college from an "urban college" to a "public liberal arts college," one that would be ranked with America's best. Two small, elite, and expensive liberal art colleges were identified as setting the standards for emulation.
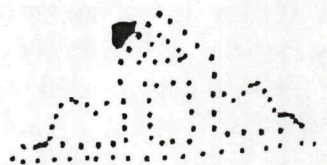
Goals for student-faculty ratio, average class size, library holdings, number of full-time faculty, and selectivity from student-applicant pools were shared. The administrator reviewed also the revised college mission statement. This included his list of guiding principles. The college "provides outstanding academic programs, encourages service and leadership" and "we are committed to a liberal arts education that stimulates intellectual inquiry and fosters social and civic values" and our "students acquire the qualities of mind and spirit that prepares them to lead lives with meaning and purpose" and "we are committed to service that shapes the economic, civic, and cultural life of our community and Commonwealth" (Mission Statement, 2000, p. 1).

The faculty listened attentively and then the administrator veered from the sequence of topics suggested by his handouts. He announced that his vision would require a "disciplined and focused" examination of several programs including social work and nursing at the undergraduate level as well as our few graduate programs. These "may have to go" if they are not judged "central to the mission" he warned. The nursing program was explicitly characterized as too costly. The termination of the program would "free up six faculty positions" for other uses. The administrator added that a speedy decision was important, and stated that the fate of the programs must be determined by the early fall Board of Visitors meeting. Faculty deference became a quiet but pervasive nonverbal expression of shock, anger, and anxiety. The administrator soon concluded his speech.

The Social Work Program is a highly regarded program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education in 1982. An "internal program review" several years earlier had found that the program had numerous strengths and no weaknesses requiring corrective action. The enrollment had been growing and there were about 140 majors. Graduates from the program routinely obtained the job of their choice or acceptance into nearby social work graduate programs. The faculty had been instrumental in the creation of a college-wide service-learning center, and two of the three faculty members had earned the state consortium's "Social Work Educator of the Year" award. Other college faculty members also favorably regarded the program. However, the administration had previously communicated in several indirect ways mixed feelings about social work.

Generally, the chief administrator had asserted his will and made all the organizational modifications he desired with minimal guidance from the faculty. Typically, major policy and personnel changes by the administration were made, like this one, near the last weeks of the semester. The faculty members were occupied with final grading and preparing to disperse for a break at semester's end. Thus, collective resistance was difficult. The social work educators faced a daunting challenge. Could the social work program be saved?

The Historical and Social Context for Social Action

The educational institution was created in 1960 as a two-year branch of a historic and renowned college. It became a four-year baccalaureate-degree-granting institution in 1971 and an independent college in 1976 (Molineax, 1999). The college is located in a suburban community on a peninsula and served communities in a 45-mile radius. In 1991, the school had the lowest tuition among state senior institutions and the highest percentage of African-American students among the non-historically black colleges in the state (Fleetwood, 2001). Six masters programs were created, and the college added graduate programs in 1992. The first residence hall was built soon after.

In 1996, the Board of Visitors began a search for a new administrator. A former national politician was selected as the school's fifth leader. This energetic administrator took charge immediately and asserted, "we don't believe in incremental progress...we are committed to dramatic transformation" (as cited in Miller, 1997, p. A1). By 2000, a new residence hall and a sport and convocation center had been built. The student enrollment reached almost 5,100 students, and students were increasingly coming from the dense and affluent metropolitan area in the north of the state. Extensive landscaping dramatically changed almost all public spaces, and the school earned a *U.S. News and World Report*'s number two rank for regional public liberal arts schools in the South (Barrett, 1999). There were plans for additional residence halls, a major expansion of the library, a parking deck, and the construction of a $40 million center for the fine and performing arts.

Since the arrival of the new administrator and his team, the state college has been characterized in business terms. The organization has been governed according to the cost-effective calculations, authoritative management style, and growth orientation that characterizes for-profit corporations and that have spread to the delivery of both social services and educational services (Denzin, 1995; White & Hauck, 2000). The local business paper credited the administrator for "acting more like a CEO than a college president" and for running the college "like a business with growth plans," and for his "aggressive" approach (Harris, 2000, p. 14). The administrator endorsed this ideology and cast the college as a "50-million-a-year business, we have over 500 employees, and we serve over 5,000 students/customers" (as cited in Harris, p. 15). One of his stock phrases was that the college offers a "private school experience at a public school cost" ("Trible," 1999, p. 1). The administrator, starting with his first major public statement, committed himself also to an extensive marketing and public relations campaign. He declared, "Our job is to tell the [college] story more powerfully and persuasively and polish it a bit and share it with the world" (Vision 2002, 1996, p. 1).

Organizational Members and Culture

A college is a complex social system composed of numerous interacting groups. Here, relevant groups included the Board of Visitors, the chief administrator and his administrative staff, the faculty, the Faculty Senate, departmental chairpersons, students, alumni, and members of the local community. The faculty and students of the social work program, graduates with a social work degree, and field instructors also had a stake in the college. The administration and faculty endorsed cultural orientations common to their professional groups (Fischer & Dirsmith, 1995). Assistant administrators emphasized political and economic action and focused on legitimizing the chief administrator's vision and his marketing strategy for realizing this vision. The faculty asserted their expertise in curriculum matters and the educational

implications of college policies. Most shared the conviction that academic quality and the integrity of programs were as important as the college's growth. The faculty at the college, as at many other colleges, were also concerned about their disenfranchisement for the sake of "rapid, flexible decision making" more suitable for a corporate model of the ideal organization than a university that appreciated faculty governance (Snyder, 2001, p. 107).

Political Processes and Structures

Power arrangements at the college could be characterized as asymmetrical. The administrator was a skillful, charismatic, experienced, and articulate politician. One faculty senator noted that over five years he has used his skills to significantly reduce the power of the faculty (Burns, personal e-mail communication, April 27, 2000). On all but one of about twenty controversial policy or personnel decisions, the administrator and his administrative staff had outmaneuvered dissenters or bypassed opponents and realized their objectives. Power had been consolidated by the administrator, also, as he has acted on the notion that all employees should conform to his vision. For instance, he discharged more than a dozen upper-level managers in his first three years. He also recruited a loyal provost. A provost is typically the academic administrator of a college. At many universities the occupant of this position has performed, historically, a liaison role between faculty and administrator. The provost has served as a faculty advocate and guardian of academic interests. This had also been changed. The provost under this administration had very limited power, devoted most of his time to service to the chief administrator, and refrained from any independent or pro-faculty assertions.

Membership Selection Processes

The new administration also changed markedly the composition of the college community. The administrator had assured his audiences in his vision statement that the university would "provide access and opportunity to a diverse community" (Vision 2002, 1996, p. 3). Yet, he also regularly touted the increase in full-time residential students and the shift to a student body more traditional in age than that during the college's first 30 years. Faculty recruiters were directed to focus their recruitment efforts on the affluent northern part of the state and cease outreach to local community colleges. The faces of student representatives (tour guides, recruits for the President's Leadership Program, cheerleaders) and the images of the student members in all recruitment publications, in all sets of college web site photos, and in all program brochures are those of 18 to 22 year old, middle and upper-middle-class, mostly white American youth. Recently, staff on the regional newspaper wrote a series of articles on the recruitment shift and the common perception that the college is "weeding out" older, nontraditional students (Barrett, 2001, p. A1). This change has been especially distressing to social work faculty who had specialized in serving students of all ages, all social classes, and all ethnic-racial memberships.

Communication Processes and Technologies

Leaders in the computer services department and the computer technicians had contributed to major changes in the university's "ecology of communication," those information technologies, communication formats, and preferred interactional patterns characterizing the organization (Altheide, 1995). In 1995, most communications between administrators and faculty members occurred by memorandums delivered manually through an interoffice mail system

or by phone. By 2000, all faculty members and most students had college e-mail accounts and all were wired to a campus network allowing quick and easy communication with each other. The majority of public correspondences and announcements were delivered electronically by the network "mailman" either to "everyone," to "faculty," or to "students." On a typical day, a faculty member might receive ten or more e-mails referring to college business events. Much other business (student reports of their absences, announcements of committee meetings, promotion of campus events) was customarily handled by e-mails exchanged between the involved parties. Only sensitive or private items were sent by inter-office campus mail, and phone conversations soon took second place to e-mail exchanges.

A Natural History of the Improvised Change Process

Natural histories are detailed descriptions of temporally extended patterns of action (Abbott, 1997; Denzin, 1988). Natural histories of social work interventions provide information on "what the major actors in the implementation process did" and "how the intervention worked" (Gilgun, 1994, p. 377). The natural history of how the author (the program chairperson and leader during the crisis) and other faculty members, Professor A and Professor B, coped with the threatened closure of the social work program follows.

Tuesday, April 25th. As I was preparing to leave my office in the morning for a field visit, the Provost dropped by and warned me that the administrator intended to recommend the review and possible termination of the social work program at the afternoon's meeting. He would not elaborate. Nor would he agree to persuade the administrator to withhold the announcement, and there was no time to argue. On my return to the school, I informed the other two social work

educators. We comforted each other and met for an hour to appraise our predicament and start to conceive of strategies and arguments for our continuance. All of us felt surprised, overwhelmed, and humiliated when the administrator announced publicly his intentions at the afternoon faculty meeting.

After the meeting, the social work faculty began the first in a series of hallway conferences. We attempted to assess the administration's possible concerns about our program. Issues like our nontraditional, high minority group composition; our support for a gay student organization; our opposition to the diversion of funds to football; and our criticisms (muted) of the administrator's abandonment of local and two-plus-two transfer students emerged as candidates for "triggers" of the review. But, we admitted that the administrator had not provided a clear rationale and we could not be certain of the cause of his dissatisfaction. The faculty began to imagine alternative ways to defend the program. We considered, for instance, enlisting the aid of several friendly legislators, of the local press, of members of the Board of Visitors, and of some renowned local attorneys. We agreed to begin with a letter and e-mail campaign. The faculty also pledged to help each other maintain a respectful attitude toward the administration, maintain our sense of solidarity with other faculty, and stay focused on the administrator's stated concern about centrality to mission.

Wednesday, April 26th. In a phone conversation, a college leader speculated with me about the administrator's selection of nursing and social work from the college's professional programs. He alerted me also to the handbook's criteria for program discontinuance – lack of centrality to mission, low community or student demand, problems with program management, low program quality, and issues related to financial viability – and to the processes for program review.

The handbook stipulated that action by the Provost should occur only after formal faculty consultation to include a conference with the Faculty Senate. This consultation had never occurred.
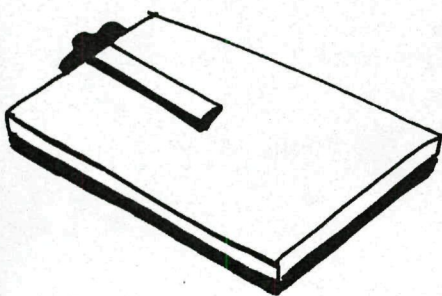
The social work faculty conferred again early in the morning. First, we fretted and imagined quitting or resigning ourselves to dismissal, but believed in the program too much for this sentiment to last. Then we agreed that we should contest the administrator's "definition of the situation" and quickly but diplomatically answer the charge that our program was peripheral. Professor A drafted a letter that I revised slightly and sent by campus e-mail service to "everyone." In the letter we asserted, "This college would be hard pressed to find an academic program here that better exemplifies the vision and mission of the college." We commented on our inclusion of many liberal arts courses in the curriculum, the leadership of our students and faculty on campus and in the community, our demonstrated record of providing access and opportunity for diverse students, and our creation of several service-learning courses later incorporated into the President's Leadership Program and the Honors Program. We called on members of the community to join us in demonstrating to the administrator that the program was central to the college's mission and should not be discontinued.

Late that day, I exchanged e-mails with members of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (UCC), a group charged with reviewing all major curriculum changes. One member sent an e-mail to me and seven other committee members that he expected that "major changes to academic programs would be deliberated by the departments, colleges, faculty senate, and UCC" and that elimination of programs "without such faculty participation would be a major violation of faculty rights" (Professor C, personal e-mail communication, April 26, 2000). I also called

the school's representative at the State Council on Higher Education who regretted that the Council has no influence over discontinuance decisions.

Thursday, April 27th. Mornings became the best time to e-mail our calls for assistance. That morning, I sent an e-mail to all those on a list of representatives to a state consortium of twelve social work programs. I instructed them of our plight, asked for their help, and urged them to spread the word. dditionally, I e-mailed the student chair of the planning committee for the annual social work rally, an event attended each fall by about 200 faculty and students. asked for help from social work student leaders in sending e-mails and letters and for a place on the program of the fall retreat. An e-mail to the 35 alumni on our list alerted them to the administrator's call for program review and solicited their help. The president of the advisory board responded very quickly to my request for help and sent an e-mail both defending the program and urging electronic organizing to his list of 80 clinical social workers.

The administrator sent me an e-mail that he appreciated our thoughtful e-mail to the entire faculty and anticipated a constructive dialogue. However, we were a bit skeptical, not optimistic, about our future, and we began exploring various unorthodox options. A faculty person who excelled in the arts of dramaturgy deliberated with me about how social work students might, if necessary, protest discreetly at the college graduation in mid-May. Balloons indicating "I support the Social Work Program," buttons declaring "I am a proud graduate of the Social Work Program," and business cards identifying the graduates' proudest accomplishment as a social work major and handed to the administrator when he shook their hands were possibilities. In our social work classes that day, students indicated their openness to a

formal and public demonstration of their disagreement with the administrator.

Friday, April 28th. On campus, allies were becoming involved. Two students (one a nursing student and daughter of a social work senior) began their own e-mail campaign to enlist other students in writing letters and e-mails, signing petitions, and making phone calls to the administrator. They argued that a decision to discontinue the Nursing and Social Work Programs "seems likely to produce only negative consequences" (Student D, personal e-mail communication, April 28, 2000). A social work student began a traditional petition-signing effort and collected more than thirty signatures by day's end. A brave faculty member leaked some information that raised our fears that the administrator might have decided our fate already. This faculty member e-mailed to everyone a notice that an administrative committee was drafting a letter. This letter advised incoming freshmen from around the state to consider their choice of major because of the termination of the Social Work Program. If sent, another faculty warned us privately, there would be no new social work majors, and the program's demise would be inevitable. Later in the day, the past president of the state's Society for Clinical Social Work, currently a vice-president of the National Federation for the Advancement of Clinical Social Work, pledged by e-mail her support.

Saturday, April 29th and Sunday, April 30th. Many faculty members joined from their homes in an internet conversation via e-mails posted to "faculty." These faculty members added to the computer-mediated discussion started several days earlier on communication problems that had contributed to the current crisis. The faculty complained of meetings by administrators that occurred behind closed doors. Many advocated, instead, for open forums and "real dialogue" between the chief administrator and large numbers of faculty members. Over the weekend, numerous faculty members also e-mailed me letters of support, encouragement, and advice. I responded to each individually and encouraged all to communicate their views to the administrator. A faculty senator and the President of the Faculty Senate confirmed by e-mail their intentions to seek a meeting with the college administrator and to advocate for the threatened programs and for greater faculty participation in college governance. The social work faculty also conferred with members of the group of social work students planning to request an audience with the administrator. These young men and women were high achievers and community leaders. They represented in many ways the administrator's notion of the ideal student. By phone and e-mail, these students later planned their presentation and set up an appointment with the administrator for the next day.

Monday, May 1st. The school newspaper had rarely commented critically on administration activities. However, a combination of e-mails, phone messages, and several personal requests from our secretary, a volunteer on the school newspaper, provoked a cover story (Flemming, 2000). The paper reported on the administrator's "shocking announcement" and quoted a critical and outspoken professor, "As I understand it nursing, social work, and graduate programs no longer fit with the administrator's Washington and Lee-Hampden Sydney model [for this university] ... That is his model. As far as I am able to tell that is not our model. It is an insufficient model" (as cited in Flemming, p. 1). In this model, we would emulate a private, elite, expensive, and residential college that offered no professional preparation or community-

oriented academic programs. In an e-mail to the administrator, I asked for clarification of the administration's thinking, asserted that "the Social Work Program adds to the excellence and energy of the college." He then added, "We intend to communicate that message to you, our students, the college, and the professional community." The college representative to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) conferred with me by phone. He had set a meeting with the administrator to help him better understand the notion of "shared governance." He also indicated that a faculty vote of censure or an appeal to the AAUP for an outside investigation were possible.

Tuesday, May 2nd. After a phone call alert, the administrator visited me in my office at 8:00 am. He graciously apologized for causing us pain and asserted that this is not how he does things. He assured me that the final decision has not yet been made, that he appreciated our "statesmanlike" e-mail to the college community, that college procedures for considering program discontinuance would be followed, and that, if terminated, the program would be phased out over four years so incoming students could complete their studies. He promised to meet promptly with our student representatives. Tellingly, he added that he intended to respond to every letter and e-mail he received, but hoped that this did not become a distraction from the other very important business we all have to deal with.

Conversations with the past and the current chair of the standing Program Review Committee offered some comfort. They told me that traditionally programs are reviewed only every five years and the review process lasts a year. Emergency reviews might be triggered by a Dean but never have been, and there was no precedence for the administrator removing authority from the committee. Later that day, a staff person in the Assessment and

Evaluation Department provided us a statistical summary of social work program information including data showing that we had graduated 20 or more students every year from 1996 to 2000, and that we had at least 90 declared majors. He added that we compared very favorably to other majors and were regularly in the top ten for number of graduates.

Wednesday, May 3rd. Early in the morning, the social work faculty met with the Provost. He gave us no answer to our question: Why were nursing and social work selected for review? He refused to advocate for the standard program review process (a year long evaluation in 2002). He reviewed the criteria for termination and indicated without explanation that the review process must be done fast and that the decision about our future was the administrator's decision to make; the faculty and the review committee could only recommend. Later that morning, a fifteen-person group of faculty chairpersons, experienced managers, other leaders, and I met in reaction to the administrator's plan to end programs. Most interpreted this challenge as a troubling indication of the administration's tendency to exclude faculty from important decision-making processes and as an extension of a non-participatory decision-making style into academic affairs.

Group members conversed for several hours. We focused on assessing the administrator's style, interests, and identity commitments. This served as the base for generating and evaluating possible action strategies. Several of us concluded that as a visionary and creative leader, the administrator had little interest in slow and complicated bureaucratic procedures and would probably not be persuaded by logic or abundant evidence regarding program quality. As a former politician, the administrator would pursue his agenda assertively until forces coalesced in opposition to his policy

recommendation. As a master of marketing and public relations, the administrator would be concerned about negative media coverage and public discussion about the unintended yet adverse consequences of discontinuing highly regarded educational programs. Until then, the defense of the social work program had been multi-faceted and our resources (time, energy, and money) were spread thin. This meeting gave us focus.

That day, I composed an e-mail letter to all potential allies of the social work program reporting on our status, reviewing the five criteria for program discontinuance, indicating some of our many strengths, asking for their support by sending letters and e-mails to the administrator, and encouraging recipients to forward my letter to other friends of the program. As an attachment to the letter, I sent the college mission statement. The group of student emissaries consolidated by telephone and e-mail their plans to meet with the administrator and to make the case based on their own experiences for the continuance of the social work major.

Thursday, May 4th. Although our social work faculty taught the value of using the media for social work advocacy in our macro-practice class, we decided to postpone any appeals to the media. We advised our allies, however, that this might be necessary soon. Yet, several students chose to call the columnist responsible for local news. Tuesday morning, a reporter for the regional paper wrote in her column a story indicating that the College "is in an uproar over news revealed by [the Administrator] ... at a faculty meeting that he plans to discontinue the nursing and social work program" and "the announcement has prompted a call for students to launch a protest through petitions, letters, e-mail, and phone calls' (Friend, 2000, p. C1). The reporter commented too that faculty considered the lack of consultation to indicate

a "complete lack of concern for their thoughts" (Friend, p. C1).

Later, the faculty of the social work program met with the President of the Faculty Senate. He listened attentively and agreed to convene the faculty senate for an emergency meeting and to request that the administrator rescind his decision or both extend the timetable and publicize the procedures for program review. In the late morning the administrator's secretary requested that the Nursing Program chairperson and I join the administrator in his office before noon. At this surprise meeting, he informed us that he had changed his mind and called off the review process. His letter to that effect was being distributed via e-mail as we talked. It included a statement indicating that because of his many conversations with faculty members, he realized that he had called for program reviews without appropriate consultation, and that he had been reminded that these programs were an important part, and should remain an important part, of the college. He complimented us on our ability to mobilize so many "troops" on such short notice, a tactic he would have used if he were in our shoes, but he asked us to ask our allies to desist and requested that the graduation ceremony not be disrupted. Since a meeting with students had been set before the administrator's change of mind, he promised to hold the meeting later that day. We agreed to these terms and thanked him for hearing us.

Assigning Meaning to the Narrative

Pragmatists and interactionists assert as a central tenet that when the environment blocks human efforts to realize their interests, self-consciousness emerges (Forte, 2001). Pre-reflective habitual action is supplemented by the conscious and deliberate search for new conceptual and tangible tools and "the major source of invention and insight ... lies with individuals as they strive to overcome some experienced difficulty" (Hickman, 1999,

p. 111). Tacit knowledge of the potential of electronic communication, in this case, was the indispensable resource.

Using the logic of the process case study (Fishman, 1999, Gilgun, 1994), I will briefly summarize my post-crisis interpretations of how our improvised action strategies functioned to achieve the hoped-for-outcome and of how well our pragmatic technologies might be used by practitioners facing similar practice challenges.

Guiding Conceptions

Computer technologies are both physical and social constructions (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000b). By chance, I was just completing a book translating major theoretical frameworks into the language of symbolic interactionism and how these frameworks can guide personal and social reconstruction (Forte, 2001). Three of these frameworks helped me appreciate the significance and the potential utility of information technologies for building a resistance movement. First, Kollock's (1999) merger of symbolic interactionist and social exchange ideas into a model of cooperation among members of virtual communities alerted me to the networking possibilities of computer-based communication. He documented how the Internet can drastically reduce the costs associated with producing public goods (like saving a program), especially compared to the investment of time, effort, and emotion necessary for conventional face-to-face community organizing or letter-writing campaigns.

Second, symbolic interactionists theorizing about ideal communities illuminated the ways that propositions about social interaction might help me mobilize effective on-line mutual aid processes (Kollock, 1998; Piliavin & Callero, 1991). Successful cooperation on projects undertaken by virtual communities requires certain psychological processes (identification with the group, sense of self as altruistic, abilities to understand the perspectives of other people and groups) and certain social processes (repeated episodes of satisfying interaction, information indicating the trustworthiness of actors, the development of shared norms, and socialization for use of the preferred communication devices). These psychological and social processes were produced or enhanced during electronic deliberations by our allies and contributed to our effectiveness.

Third, critical-interactionist theorists reminded me of the social group work lesson that just communities use democratic processes that promote member participation (Sirls, Rubinstein, Meyerson & Klein, 1980). Distorted communication occurs when powerful actors misuse their power to prevent open and free discourse. The ideal communication situation, in contrast, is one among equals, and one whose "members make good sense, offer rationales for their action, mean what they say, and practice what they preach" (Shalin, 1992, p. 253). We aimed to foster honest communication and to equalize our power relationships with the college administrator.

Intervention Tools

Thanks to new tools for Internet use (Netscape Communicator Browser and Messenger), we were able to supplement voice mail and snail mail requests for support with e-mail. This allowed fast and effortless communication with widely dispersed allies; the creation of address cards for the individual and group members of a rapidly expanding network; message dissemination at any time of the day; multiple e-mail mailings with one mouse click; censorship-foiling tactics (a planned shift, if necessary, to home-based Internet service providers, for example); and the easy use of e-mail reply, forward, save, and print procedures. More important, the Internet allowed extensive community organizing with a manageable expenditure of

time and money. Our cyber allies were ready and willing to pay this price to defend our social work program. They were committed to their social work identities and valued political advocacy. They trusted each other, and they were willing to demand to be heard during college deliberations. It also helped that the administrator, as he had declared previously, had limited use for e-mail and that his assistants seemed to underestimate its potential for mobilizing opposition to administrative policy proposals.

Assessment

A college is an environment rich in resources. The opportunity to engage experienced faculty, administrators, deans, agency directors, clinical and community-based practitioners, and students in the assessment process gave us a rich, multi-perspectival understanding of the administrator, his proposal to consider discontinuance, and the likely response to various action strategies. Especially helpful were assessment recommendations related to the administrator's frequently declared "students first" commitment and to his determination to present a positive image of the college to new markets for student applicants.

Access to college resources also made possible the use of multiple approaches to data gathering and thus the "triangulation" (Gilgun, 1994) of the best position for program advocates. Methods included content analysis of news stories about the college found in the online archives of the regional paper and the school newspaper, analysis of e-mails sent to the whole college, and analysis of Faculty Senate minutes; participant observation, especially at meetings with administrators (meetings where extensive note taking is normative); individual interviews with colleagues from different departments; numerous ad hoc focus groups organized around questions like "What do the

administrators really intend?" and "How might we persuade them to listen?"; and secondary analysis of official college statistics.

Goals

The focused yet urgent nature of our objective contributed to our success. We aimed to evoke a public declaration from the chief administrator that, at best, he would rescind his request for a discontinuance review, and, at least, he would support a faculty-led, by-the-book, one-year review process. College members who have pursued more ambitious goals – the affirmation in deed as well as word of the principle of shared governance, for example – have been unsuccessful. The members of the "Save our Undergraduate Program" campaign, also, honored our commitment to conduct ourselves in a consistently professional and civil manner. Morally ambiguous means to achieve the goal were avoided (although contemplated as appropriate in more desperate circumstances that fortunately never arrived).

Results

The blending of on-line, voice-to-voice, and face-to-face organizing made a difference. My tally of e-mails shows that in only one week we had enlisted the help of at least 45 cyber allies. These included a college program administrator, four faculty members, three current social work majors and non-majors, 12 members of a local social service agency, three sets of parents, six community practitioners and agency directors, 13 alumni, and two faculty members from other colleges. (It appears that numerous others communicated to the administration but without sending me a copy of their correspondence.) Each had responded to our electronic request for help by writing to the chief administrator. Noting the administrator's commitment to the courtesy of responding to all letters, we believe that he suspected the

start of an avalanche. Proceeding with the plan to review and terminate the Social Work Program despite such opposition would have been very time consuming.

Both the quantity and the quality of the e-mail appeals to the administration were impressive. Many alumni attributed their career successes to the social work program and commented on the many different public problems they work, thereby, to solve. Practitioners and field instructors wrote of the program's preparation of skilled and committed community servants and leaders. A program assessment expert spoke of the program's rigor, high quality of instruction, cost efficiency, sensitivity to diversity, and solid reputation. Parents shared their pride in the sons and daughters who graduated from the program and worried about the harm and injustice that would be associated with the program's termination. Many commented on the absence of alternative programs nearby. Agency directors attempted to educate the administration about the variety of social work roles, the importance of the profession to the lives of many people, and the regional demand for social workers. All e-mails communicated pro-program statements with intelligence, eloquence, passion, courtesy, and determination.

Lessons

The current political-economic environment in the United States presents many challenges to progressive-minded and critical social workers. We need every tool we can muster. Recent advances in technology offer us a whole new set of tools. From this experience, I have made a commitment to myself to maintain my computer and its software in a ready-mode; to add constantly to my address book, e-mail addresses of potential friends and allies; to communicate frequently with many of these friends; to monitor on-line newspapers, college discussions, and department announcements

for clues of likely threats; to protect my reputation off- and on-line as trustworthy; and to explore further the opportunities provided by new technologies for promoting democratic and just communities. While the specific events told of here will never be duplicated, these lessons might encourage other social worker educators and practitioners to use technology in practical and responsible ways to meet comparable threats to their programs, their students, their clients, or their careers.

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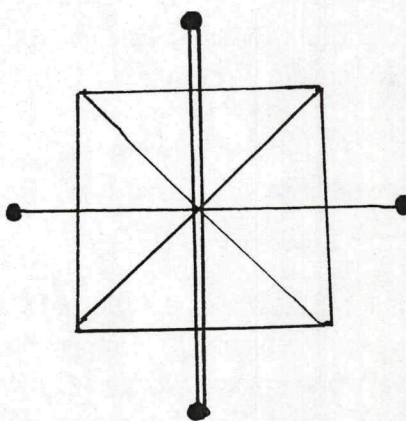
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