

# Data Use Problems of Practice: Managing the Dynamics of Dissent

*How can you encourage faculty to express different views about data, and create a tone of low threat, high trust, and mutual respect? How can you, at the same time, keep faculty deliberations focused on actions toward the shared goals for program improvement?*

*“I’ve heard other people ask very direct questions about what this [new assessment] is and how it will change things and what’s the burden on the teacher candidate compared to the benefits. This kind of openness and attitude, that if you do not agree with the conversation as it’s going, is fine. I’ve worked in a bunch of places. This is one place where nobody is ever encouraged to stop talking. I think we always feel like we’re listened to. It doesn’t mean anything changes or things change all the time because of the way we want them. It’s just somebody listens.”*

Issues of accountability and data use in teacher education can be charged with tension and paradox, as teacher educators may interpret these policies in the context of negative rhetoric about teachers and teacher educators from some policy makers as well as members of the public. Others bring more ideological and critical perspectives to these conversations, and may see data use initiatives as an unwelcome sign of the intrusion of corporate or political interests into the work of teacher education. A key challenge for academic leaders at every level is how to manage, and even encourage constructive critique while at the same time channeling that criticism in ways that contribute to program improvement, rather than program paralysis. When done well, the result of this approach is a culture that views sincere critique of proposed changes as a valuable resource.

Perhaps the most fundamental dilemma to address around the dynamics of dissent and change is how dissent can function as both a barrier as well as a resource for learning and program improvement. In the most successful programs we visited, there was shared understanding that differences of opinion contribute to more thoughtful deliberation and better decisions. As one faculty member put it, *“Whenever there’s dissent...usually there’s a piece or an ounce of positive or truth or what-not that comes from that dissent.”* At the same time, one very skilled academic leader reminded us, *“If you let some people dominate the dis-*

*cussion, they can and will derail any efforts to make change.”* We are respectful of this reality. At the same time, our observation has been that the way dissenting views are handled, particularly by administrators and faculty leaders, has a great deal to do with accessing and focusing the creative capacity of program faculty and staff. One faculty member we interviewed commented on how support for diverging viewpoints was integral to the inquiry-oriented culture of the program:

*“In any program, our program included ... they use data to solve problems—‘Are we doing good?’—to measure your progress in solving the problem. But here that same data might get used to reformulate the original problem. Then you might say, ‘Wait a second, whether or not we’re solving the problem, is that the right problem?’ That’s great. That’s exciting. It means that it’s... it’s that word, ‘animating’. That makes it come alive ... I think I would frame it as genuine inquiry.”*

Below, we describe several leadership strategies that we have observed program leaders applying to manage the dilemmas of dissent that inevitably (and often productively) arise in the context of data use activities. We do not intend these as prescriptions for your program, but rather as promising practices you may find useful, and may consider adapting for your local context:

### Use your active listening skills

One of the common complaints of dissenting faculty is that their views are not listened to. As is true in most face-to-face communication, the technique of “active” listening (e.g., “Let me say back to you what I’ve just heard to make sure I understand what you are saying.”) can be helpful in assuring dissenters that leaders hear and comprehend their arguments. This does not imply agreement; rather, it is a matter of making clear that any disagreement is not due to misinterpretation or lack of respect.

### Collect data on how faculty are feeling and thinking

One program director we observed regularly collects brief “free writes” from program members, soliciting their input and opinions about issues under deliberation. She makes her analysis of this input visible to faculty by reporting back summaries of what they said. Using the actual wording taken from the written input can help assure individuals that leaders are hearing and considering opinions carefully. The data from these free writes can also be used as a common text to focus further analysis and discussion, as well as a tool for making the relationship between the views expressed by highly vocal individuals and those of other group members transparent and visible, without being confrontational.

### Structure deliberative discussions

We observed some program leaders using deliberative structures in ways that clearly encourage articulation of different positions on important program decisions. For example, you might invite all program members to participate in a process where they make arguments in favor of a proposal, then collectively make arguments against. The point here is to scaffold the expression of dissenting views by allowing arguments to be disassociated from individuals.

### Stay out of the way

Cultivating a culture of inquiry is primarily about assisting faculty thinking. Skillful facilitation of discussion and deliberation is an artful combination of providing relevant and timely information, raising important questions, and listening. The most adept leaders we observed were good at listening and acknowledging what their faculty had to say, often serving as a recorder and facilitator. They often guided discussions subtly and indirectly by summarizing arguments and raising questions instead of taking strong positions themselves.

### Beware of your own emotions

Managing the dynamics of faculty dissent can be trying. In our observations, it appears every faculty has at least one member that is chronically antagonistic toward change, and the issues surrounding how academic leaders respond to them are complex and layered. Faculty are alert to the emotional undertone of interactions around disagreement and dissent; even those who are not involved directly in contentious interactions are keenly observant of the handling of dissenting views. The artful practices of the leaders we observed certainly included responding to dissenting views with respect, but they also involved redirecting conversations toward shared goals and sometimes even placing topics of individual concern in a “parking lot” for later discussion.