Is your department toxic? A handy guide, without gifs
By Acclimatrix at Tenure, She Wrote

Your academic department can seem a bit like a family: you’re deeply connected, and they can be your best friends and biggest advocates, but also a tremendous source of stress. You’re forced to interact several times a year, so even if something goes wrong, you can’t necessarily avoid them. There’s often that one eccentric person who says the most outlandish stuff at holiday parties or meetings. And, like family, they pick you (for the most part); you don’t have a lot of choice in who you end up with.

The latter isn’t technically true, because you should be vetting a department when you interview, but a lot of the more toxic aspects of departmental culture can be hidden when you’re being recruited and everyone is putting their best face forward. Like an advisor or lab culture, the interconnected nature of academia means that departmental culture can make or break your experience if you’re not careful. Collegiality is an under-appreciated side of what makes a good university. Job candidates often focus on location, or prestige, or resources (all good things!), but the simple question "are folks decent and good to work with?" is a hard question to ask, and to get an honest answer to. There are ways around this -- I do think it’s good to ask, "what’s the department culture like," or "is there anyone I should know about in advance?" when you interview. And if someone is unhappy (especially junior faculty who may be more sensitive to this), it’s surprisingly easy to get them talking. Which gets at the very core of why departmental collegiality is so important: if your department is not collegial, it’s isolating. It’s stressful. And it can seriously hamper departmental operations (think hiring, developing good mentoring programs or graduate curricula, teaching loads, etc.).

Faculty interactions aren’t always going to be cupcakes and rainbows, and conflict will inevitably arise. Anything true of a healthy relationship will also be true here. What’s important is not whether people argue or disagree, but how they do. So how can you tell the difference between a collegial and a toxic department? Here are some useful questions to ask (without those annoying animated gifs that make the web version unreadable).

1) What is the department's energy?

A toxic department may be characterized by relentless negativity*. New ideas are shut down. People are bitter to the point of being hostile, and focus more on outlining problems than solutions. Ideas are met with jadedness, skepticism, sarcasm. In my experience, this attitude starts small, with a cadre of folks who hang out together (largely because other people eschew them for the emotional draining company). If you’re new, they may try to suck you in to their whirlpool of anger and unhappiness. Resist.
In contrast, a collegial department laughs together in faculty meetings, celebrates accomplishments like tenure, has an active mentoring program, is welcoming to new faculty (people will ask you to coffee), shares space or equipment, is generous with their time and energy, has folks who bring you lasagna when you break your arm and can’t cook, and welcomes new ideas or suggestions.

1) How does the department handle diversity?
In a toxic department, sexism, racism, or other bigoted behavior create a hostile environment. Suggestions about improving diversity are met with skepticism, resistance, or outright hostility. Micro- or macro-aggressions can turn a department toxic really quickly, because they can create bad feeling that cascades into other interactions. If you’re interviewing and the male colleagues who have taken you out are making sexist, transphobic remarks about a colleague colleague over dinner, maybe these are people you don’t want to work with (and the chair or university ombudsperson should probably know that). If you don’t discover this until you arrive, you’ve got a long slog ahead of you. A university ADVANCE program (if you have one), an ombudsperson, or diversity dean may help, but a university that doesn’t support diversity is often more worried about litigation than creating a healthy culture.

In contrast, a collegial department is open to improvement through workshops and training, and actively embraces diversity. It is welcoming to suggestions for improvement, recognizes areas it needs to improve, supports minority faculty and students, treats departmental staff well (class, gender, and racial inequality issues often play out in how the secretaries are treated), and has strong leadership that is receptive when you bring up problems. People will make mistakes, but colleagues will correct each other, and be open to correction.

2) How would you characterize the department’s social culture?
Sometimes a toxic culture reveals itself not with hostility, but with apathy. An apathetic or poorly unified department routinely doesn’t show up to seminars, coffee chats, happy hours, or defenses -- or doesn’t even have a structure to bring people together (or only focuses on after-hours events that exclude faculty with kids, for example). Or, when people do get together, they just gossip about other members of the department. Gossip happens in every department, but if the only goal is schadenfreude or to belittle your colleagues, all you’re going to do is undermine trust and create bad feeling. ***

Collegial departments, in contrast, have a diverse range of opportunities for faculty, staff, postdocs, and students to come together to share ideas, celebrate accomplishments, and honor one another. There’s a strong support for attending seminar even when it’s outside your field Faculty aren’t all necessarily BFFs, but may gather for lunch or coffee to exchange ideas or talk shop. I know I’ll get pushback on this, because not everyone likes happy hours, seminars, or taking
breaks, but I firmly believe that these are a sign of a strong department. ****

3) What are the departmental politics like?

A toxic department has clear factions. They often form because of disciplinary divides (the applied versus "pure" earth scientists, or the molecular versus whole organismal biologists, the literature versus compositional English professors, etc.). These fissures can undermine a department, creating disciplinary but also practical splits about how to allocate funds, who to hire, etc. Hiring is especially tricky -- failed searches are often (but not always) a clue that there's some factional split and the department can't rally. ***** In a toxic department, disagreements routinely turn into fights, and these can be personal and nasty. This is often the result of weak departmental leadership; a chair's job is to balance personal forces in the department and prevent factions from developing.

In contrast, a collegial department has disagreements, which may even be heated, but these are resolved personally in the end. Once a decision is made, the department rallies -- especially for a job search outcome. Faculty are respectful of those outside their discipline, and are able to see what the department needs as a whole, rather than merely advocating for what they personally want. Compromises are made, and people don't hold grudges. Everyone feels that they can speak up in a meeting and they will be heard and respected.

In an ideal world, you’d be able to spot a toxic department before you took a job, but that’s now always possible. If you're in a toxic department, you have a few options: 1) look for other jobs. This may seem extreme, but if you're genuinely unhappy, this is a good reason to keep an eye out.** 2) Wait it out. Often, the toxic elements in a department are senior faculty, who will gradually phase out. You can work to create a more positive culture -- a departmental happy hour or a junior faculty support lunch -- which will be in place when the toxic elements depart. Or, you can talk to your chair. I was struggling with a combative, sexist emeritus professor, so I talked to departmental leadership, and they asked this person to take a back seat in discussions. It worked. 3) Ask your chair, dean, or an ombudsperson to organize a departmental workshop with an outside third party like Sustained Dialog.

Is your department toxic or collegial? How did it get that way? How has it affected you? What have you done to make your department better?

* Yes, there will always be an element of this, especially if your university is going through tough times. Stress, anger, or sadness are all perfectly valid responses. But negativity shouldn't be a defining element of your personality or your departmental culture.

** But remember not to be too negative about your current position when you’re applying. Hiring committees are on the lookout for people who are going to make good colleagues, so if you come across as someone who will tip that balance by
trash-talking your current department, that actually reflects more poorly on you.

***This is really hard to combat: you can say "I am not comfortable with this conversation; please don’t talk to me about our colleagues," but that’s not going to endear you to the gossiper.

**** This is based on my own experience. And I don't buy the argument that people don’t have time for this stuff, or that it takes critical time away from the bench. Every single "powerhouse" department I've visited or been a member of have all had multiple, well-attended social events.

***** Or, if someone is actually brought on, there can be resentment. A female friend in a mostly-male department was told "half of us didn't want you" when she was hired. That's a big bowl of NOPE right there.