Restructuring for a Brighter Future: Organizational Design and Culture Change in 21st Century Higher Education

by Steven M. Hays

"Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten."
- B. F. Skinner (quoted in Wyatt, 2006).

In a 2006 report on the state of higher education in the United States, Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings stated that there is an urgent need for change in America's higher education system. Over time, the higher education system has invested tens of billions of dollars in funds and hoped for the best. However, this has not been enough.

In order to remain competitive in the 21st century global economy, institutions of higher education must act now and work together to find the right solutions to ensure higher education is best situated for a bright future. A comprehensive strategy is needed that will better serve Americans and address the economic and workforce needs of the future. What used to work in the past will not work in the future. Leaders at colleges and universities must consider organizational design change that first begins with change in the organizational culture that currently permeates these institutions.

Organizational Culture in Higher Education

Years before Spellings' call for new solutions to the problems plaguing higher education, a report was issued in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education that found "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people." As a result of the report, there were calls for

innovation and adaptation on the part of colleges and universities. For years, that call has gone unheeded and, as a result, some questions have been raised:

- Why has higher education been so slow to react? The answer may lie in that before any innovation and adaptation can occur, organizational culture changes have to occur in institutions of higher education.

- Can the organizational culture of a higher education institution be changed and, if so, how?

Traditionally, organizations that are characterized by a strong culture have been associated with excellence and a design structure that effectively supports the business and strategies of the organization (Arnold & Capella, 1985; Tichy, 1982). However, as the field of higher education faces issues such as a proliferation of online education, new global markets and a changing student demographic, it is imperative that leaders in higher education understand that organizational culture must change in order to facilitate continued growth and success. Before positive change can occur, these leaders must first understand the organizational culture that currently permeates their institutions.

The Challenges of Cultural Change

There is much more to institutions of higher education than what meets the eye. Behind the educational programs, policies and services provided, is the organizational culture that determines results in the institution. According to Cameron and Quinn (2006), organizational culture comprises the taken-for-granted values or underlying assumptions, expectations and definitions present in an organization. Without organizational culture change, there is little hope of long-lasting improvement in organizational performance.

Findings by Cameron and Freeman in a 1991 study of organizational culture at 334 institutes of higher learning, as well as those of Smart and Hamm (1993) and Smart and St. John (1996), have found that most colleges and universities have a clan culture. While the clan culture is dominant, there are other cultural issues that, as a result of various subgroup culture clashes, must be addressed. Cameron and Quinn (2006) note that leaders should also be sensitive to differences between what the current organizational culture type is and what is preferred by those who work at the institution.

Organizational culture is the primary factor that determines whether organizations are great or mediocre. Cameron and Quinn (2006) state that organizational culture is the most important competitive advantage successful organizations have. Organizations will ultimately get only as far their organizational culture takes them. As institutions of higher education in the United States look for new solutions, leadership at these institutions must address the issues related to its organizational culture. This is only the first step, however. As changes in organizational culture occur, there must also be a change in organizational design.

Organizational Design Change in the Higher Education Institution

The technological forces at work today are inevitably impacting the organizational design of higher education. No longer can universities and colleges seek to stand alone as ivory towers. There is a need for these institutions to update their organizational design based on a network of social and technological systems.

Thomas Hughes (2001) says that the history of technology shows that socio-technological systems, rather than technological systems, will determine the future of higher education. In addition, Brown (2001) writes that learning networks via socio-technological systems can help transform a university into a learning organization with an extended reach across the world. This organizational structure of networked institutions of higher education develops active linkages between internal units within the institution and other colleges and universities to meet the institution's knowledge needs. These networks can take the form of strategic alliances, research partnerships and consortia.

Dr. A.W. Bates (1997) suggests that if new information technologies are to play a central role in higher education, leadership must develop a set of strategies for change, which will amount to no less than an organizational design restructuring of the institution. Chief among these organizational strategies are:

- **Technology**
  Universities and colleges should invest in the development of a relevant information technology infrastructure. Priorities must be set on both the level of investment, as well as the areas of investment.

- **People infrastructure**

  Just as important as the technology infrastructure, if not more so, are the people who make up the culture of the institution. Bates (1997) states that the most consistent complaint across university and college campuses is the inadequacy of resources and support from leadership. From a teaching and learning perspective, it is critical that faculty members receive ongoing training and educational support.

- **New organizational structures**

  Along with technology and people infrastructures, there is a need for new organizational structures. Bates (1997) says that the challenge in developing these new structures is to develop a system that encourages teaching units to be flexible, innovative and respond quickly to changes in subject matter, student needs and technology, while avoiding duplication, redundancy and conflicting standards and policies.

Institutions of higher education should seek out strategic alliances between themselves and other institutions of higher learning, as well as the private sector. When these strategic alliances or networks are formed between colleges and universities, joint programs can be developed, providing an opportunity for faculty, staff and student interchange. At the same time, alliances can be developed with the private sector, which can provide: 1) improved connectivity on and off campus for the institution, 2) investment in program areas that are critical to the growth of the institution and 3) the development of joint educational initiatives that provide benefits for both partners.

The Role of Leadership in Organizational Design Change

Albert Einstein once stated that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. Former U.S. Secretary of Education Dr. Rod Paige (2006) said that part of growth is experiencing change and that there is no place that has a higher potential for change than the higher education system.

Secretary Spellings (2006), in the report "A Test on Leadership" on the future of higher education, noted what many may perceive as arrogance on the part of higher education leadership:

> "We remained so far ahead of our competitors for so long, that we began to take our postsecondary superiority for granted. The results of this inattention are sobering. As higher

education evolves in unexpected ways, a new landscape is emerging that demands innovation and flexibility from the institutions that serve the nation's learners."

In implementing organizational design changes along a network model, it is imperative that leaders of higher education institutions identify a proper process for implementing change. This process should include:

- Gathering data and soliciting feedback throughout the process;
- Communicating with faculty, staff and students concerning relevant issues and data;
- Implementing changes that support the vision and goals of the institution;
- Focusing on what is possible and most beneficial to the college or university.

At the same time, institutional leadership should also seek to develop cross-college and cross-disciplinary opportunities both within and outside the college and encourage faculty and staff creativity. In the higher education organization of the future, it will be leadership's role to create the appropriate context and remove any barriers to free-flowing network contacts (Galbraith, 2000). What will happen when leaders value and build these networks in higher education? America's colleges and universities will embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement; they will develop new pedagogies, curricula and technologies to improve learning; and, at the same time, develop a platform for lifelong learning.

Killman (1999) suggests that the 21st century will be full of organizational surprises. The traditional forms of organization, such as the bureaucratic hierarchies that are so often applied to colleges and universities, will no longer be relevant. He predicts that we will see the emergence of the network as the 21st century form of higher education institution.

Conclusion

The future of higher education institutions in the United States is threatened by global competitive pressures, powerful technological developments, restraints on public finance and serious structural limitations that cry out for reform (Spellings, 2006). In order to become more transparent, faster to respond to rapidly changing circumstances and increasingly productive, colleges and universities must seek to change their current organizational cultures and, at the same time, look to redesign their current organizational structures into networks that function as one.

There must be a principle of solidarity and true partnership amongst higher education institutions worldwide. Leaders in these institutions can no longer be followers. They must be trendsetters who shape the future, because the future is the only timeframe that can be influenced. In the future, collaboration and group work among colleges, universities and other organizations will become the norm. This networking between institutions of higher education will be crucial for those who seek to understand global issues, the role of democratic governance and the need for living together with different cultures and values. Further, it will better enable students to be career-ready in a world where education should put them at the gate to their lives and their futures.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians (12:12-20) about Christ's church being one body, so too must colleges and universities seek to become one body that is networked with many members (in both the education and the business sector), relying on the various strengths and diversity of each member, in order to create an improved and revitalized system of higher education that is better suited to meet the demands as well as the opportunities of the future.

About the author

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