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ABSTRACT

This study examined an institution that is in the process of developing programs and organizations to meet the new challenges faced by higher education. It reviewed the evolution of a new, boundary-spanning organization at a major research university from the perspective of the persons involved. The study looked at the experiences of the people within the organization, at how these experiences reflect a growing professional culture, and at the lessons to be learned by others in similar situations. Cross-sectional ethnographic data were gathered through observations of meetings, interviews, and content analysis of internal documents. Analysis found the data clustered around the following themes: (1) role ambiguity, (2) image management, (3) cultural differences between the study group and other campus units, (4) composition of the study group, and (5) external community service roles. Findings suggest that administrators and faculty will have to: spend considerable time managing constituencies; attend to how people communicate; avoid judging new organizations by conventional standards; and learn to be comfortable with ambiguity. The paper calls for a new language to address the emerging boundary-spanning organizational cultures. (Contains 18 references.) (CH)

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Observations on Boundary Spanning and Culture in Higher Education: An Exploratory Study of a Start-up Organization

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Introduction

In many ways, the university today has become the most complex institution in modern society - far more complex than corporations or governments. We are comprised of many activities, some nonprofit, some publicly regulated, and some operating in intensely competitive marketplaces. . . In systems terminology, the modern university is a loosely-coupled, adaptive system, with a growing complexity as its various components respond relatively independently to changes in their environment. We have developed a transactional culture, in which everything is up for negotiation. (State of the University Address, 1995, p. 3).

It has nearly become a cliché to speak of far reaching changes influencing higher education and the resulting complexity found within the modern university in today's society. Abstract terms such as globalization, technological complexity or competitive markets, which are fashionable in the current rhetoric of higher education, may have little meaning until they are operationalized in the form of new programs, policies, or organizational forms. In the process of developing new programs or organizations to meet the new environmental challenges faced by higher education, abstract terms are reconstructed by those persons actually conducting the work of transformation.

This is a study of one such organization in which the vision of the new university is being translated into real projects and activities, often with no precedent or rules to guide its development. As one of the members has remarked, "We're making it up as we go along." Her statement is not simply a flippant remark or a sign of poor planning. It is emblematic of the organizational reality for members of a new boundary spanning organization whose charge is no less than to construct a new notion of the university. The program is divorced from the rhetoric and abstraction of current discourse and operates largely through the ingenuity and flexibility of its members, who attempt to make sense of novel situations or promote new ideas.

It is an organization that operates as a distributed community of professionals who come together in ad hoc arrangements or communicate electronically to achieve organizational goals. It is a start-up business experiencing the insecurities and exhilaration

of experimentation. It is the new kid on the block who must compete with more established rivals for respect. It is an agile, market sensitive enterprise promising products based on faith and hard work. It is a place where people retreat to, rather than retreat from, in order to develop new ideas. It is an organization that is attempting to establish itself in a world where everything is up for negotiation.

Boundary Spanning and Culture in an Open System

Colleges and universities have been described by organizational theorists as complex social organizations. Etzioni (1983) has depicted colleges and universities as intricate social systems that engage in a multitude of transactions with their environments. Katz and Kahn (1978) have characterized such a system of transactions as an open system:

Open system theory emphasizes the close relationship between a structure and its supporting environment. It begins with the concept of entropy, the assumption that without continued inputs any system soon runs down. . . The other major emphasis. . . is on throughput: the processing of production inputs to yield some outcome that is used by an outside group or system. . . another aspect of open systems theory is its inclusion of different systems and their interrelationships. A pattern of collective behavior with a limited specific function may tie into other patterns to achieve a more general outcome, as in the case of work groups whose cooperative relationship insures a final product (p. 3).

Given the reality of colleges and universities as complex organizations serving multiple, and often conflicting, audiences and environments, how do the participants in an organizational unit that is at the nexus of these competing and ambiguous roles experience and interpret their work? In order to answer this question, we look to notions of boundary spanning and organizational culture, first as separate concepts and then as an integrative scheme.

Boundary spanning

Miles (1980) has described the boundaries of an organization as an area in which segments of an organization and its environment converge in order to carry out actions that create a better fit between the organization and that environment. In all instances, the boundaries are as well defined as the organization deems necessary. No organization

operates in a vacuum. As a result, there are people who operate at the boundaries of higher education institutions to create partnerships and form beneficial relationships with other individuals or organizations. These people are known as boundary spanners (Corwin, in Seymour, 1989). Seymour (1989) points out that boundary spanners play a key role in bridging environmental and internal events by acting as external representatives, monitoring and interpreting key events, performing gate-keeping functions, coordinating activities, and protecting the institution's interests.

Research on boundary spanning in higher education has focused on the potential opportunities or problems that await colleges and universities in their external environments (Lynton, 1989; Teitel, 1989; Barak, 1989) or boundary spanning as a means to improve decision making and communication (Glover and Mills, 1989; Gratz and Salem, 1989). In each case, the voices of the boundary spanners themselves have been silent. Earlier accounts of boundary spanning, while clearly useful for planning in higher education, have tended to focus on well established boundary spanning activities such as the relationship between institutions and state higher education boards (Barak, 1989). We know little about the routines, difficulties, or successes that boundary spanning organization members face in developing a new program. Such information may provide a rich complement to the current literature on boundary spanning in higher education.

Culture

Organizational culture has been defined variously as "the way members of a collective organize their experience" (Barley, 1983, p. 393); an amalgam of symbols, language, ideologies, rituals, and myths (Pettigrew, 1979); shared assumptions that determine the way members should perceive, think, and feel (Schein, 1985); a network of values, heroes, rites and rituals, and communications (Deal and Kennedy, 1982); and a source of norms, rules, group attitudes, customs, and roles (Wharton and Worthley, 1983). Jelinek, Smircich, and Hirsch (1983) suggest that the subjective elements of an organization -- the manner in which participants make sense of and interpret organizational

phenomena -- are the essence of organizational culture. They depict culture as “another word for social reality” (p. 331) and the “continuous recreation of shared meanings” (p. 335).

There are two primary dimensions along which organizational culture has been discussed in extant literature: Strength and content. Strength refers to the extent to which values, beliefs, and norms are clearly defined and the extent to which they are rigorously enforced. In a strong organizational culture, for example, participants are likely to construe phenomena similarly. Content refers to the substance of specific values, beliefs, and norms. For example, cultural content may include values of flexibility, rule-orientation, people orientation, and competition (O’Reilly, Chapman, and Caldwell, 1991). Quinn (1988) describes culture in the following dichotomous terms: (1) Predictability-spontaneity, (2) internal focus-external focus, (3) order-flexibility, and (4) long-term or short-term focus.

Ott (1989) has distilled four functions of organizational culture that seem to have general agreement across the literature: (1) It provides shared patterns of cognitive interpretations or perceptions, so organization members know how they are expected to act and think, (2) it provides shared patterns of affect, an emotional sense of involvement and commitment to organizational values and moral codes -- of things worth working for and believing in -- so organizational members know what they are expected to value and how they are expected to feel, (3) it defines and maintains boundaries, allowing identification of members and nonmembers, and (4) it functions as an organizational control system, prescribing and prohibiting certain behaviors (p. 68). Ott’s synthesis of the literature clearly emphasizes culture as a regulatory, consensus-producing phenomenon with metaphorical or actual boundaries that help distinguish insiders from outsiders. Such a rendering limits our capacity to describe the cultural aspects of boundary spanning organizations because routines and phenomena may exist that are equivocal and fluid.

The Intersection of Boundary Spanning and Culture

Emerging paradigms have succeeded in extending the limited and restrictive conceptions of organizational culture depicted in existing literature. Martin (1992), for example, suggests that the study of organizational culture can be classified according to three perspectives: Integration, differentiation, and fragmentation. These perspectives are characterized chiefly by their treatment of ambiguity (See table 1). Of particular interest to our investigation, Martin observes that studies in the fragmentation perspective “focus on ambiguity as the essence of organizational culture” (1992, p. 12). That is, the lines between cultural insiders and outsiders become blurred as boundaries are constantly shifting and permeable, the multiplicity of participant interpretations does not appear to coalesce into a uniform consensus, and the culture is marked by complexity, lack of order, and unpredictability. Based on her treatment of ambiguity as a core cultural feature, Martin’s notions offer a way for scholars to think about boundary spanning activities from a cultural perspective. Equipped with Martin’s conceptual scheme as a touchstone, investigators have a means of analyzing and discussing how cultural development may proceed and gradually take root in a complex boundary spanning organization.

Table 1. Defining characteristics of three cultural perspectives (Martin, 1992)

Perspective	Integration	Differentiation	Fragmentation
Orientation	Organization-wide consensus	Subcultural consensus	Multiplicity of views (no consensus)
Relation among manifestations	Consistency	Inconsistency	Complexity (not clearly consistent or inconsistent)
Orientation to ambiguity	Exclude it	Channel it outside subcultures	Focus on it
Metaphors	Clearing in jungle, monolith, hologram	Islands of clarity in sea of ambiguity	Web, jungle

While the fragmentation perspective advanced by Martin permits a view of organizational life in which boundary spanning interacts with culture, the convergence of

boundary spanning and organizational culture have been largely unexplored in the higher education literature. This paper describes the evolution of a new, boundary spanning organization in a major research university from the perspective of the persons involved in developing and carrying out the projects. The study was guided by the following questions:

What are the experiences of persons within a new university boundary spanning organization?

How do these experiences reflect a growing professional culture?

How can an understanding of the experiences of persons in an evolving culture provide lessons for persons considering similar boundary spanning programs?

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

Because of the lack of understanding of how members of new boundary spanning organizations in higher education experience the development of a new culture, we selected a cross-sectional, ethnographic research design to guide the study. We gathered data through participant-observations of meetings and daily operations, interviews, and content analysis of internal and external documents related to the organization. The formal data gathering for the study took place over a nine month period, although one member of the research team had been a part of the organization since its inception, approximately one and a half years. He took on the role of “local” during the data gathering phase of the study. As a two-person research team, we were able to benefit from the insider - outsider perspective of each team member, which strengthened the understanding of organizational phenomena, while allowing us to step back from the data and look upon it with fresh eyes. We must note that as non-neutral investigators our goal was to understand the complexity and richness of the organizational experience through the work lives of the people engaged in this new endeavor.

Institutional Sample Selection

Through purposive sampling, we selected a new boundary spanning organization at a large midwestern public university as the site for this field study. The Dean requested that we not to use the name of his organization, which we refer to in this paper as the Start-Up Program (SUP). We selected participants and informants for the study based on their attendance at the organization's weekly meeting; all of their names are pseudonyms.

Interview Protocol and Data Collection Procedures

The interview protocol was purposefully open-ended and broadly structured to prompt organization members for information on their backgrounds, involvement with the boundary spanning organization, perceptions of the culture, and speculative ideas about the future of the organization. We made an attempt to construct questions that would not lead the informants toward a particular response, nor impose *a priori*, interviewer-defined categories. For example, rather than ask if the organization is responsive to market conditions, we asked informants, "How would you describe the culture of [organization name]?" Whether the informants referred to entrepreneurial activities or new projects or not, their responses were equally telling.

Data Analysis

All of the interview sessions and all but one of the weekly meetings were tape recorded (a larger group meeting was not recorded because a tape recorder would not have been effective). We typically conducted participant observation simultaneously in order to enhance inter-rater reliability of the observations. We individually analyzed the data by first identifying codes, then by grouping and discussing major emergent themes that ran through the observations, interviews, and documents. The joint analysis focused on the identification of themes that were common in the separate analyses and on the thematic differences that emerged across the various data sources.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Our observations, interviews, and document analysis reveal that the cultural emergence of a boundary spanning program in a large research university is a very

complicated phenomenon. We found that the nature and direction of the program is being shaped by a host of organization members whose perspectives and understanding of organizational goals vary, but appear to be converging. The organizational structure, patterns of communication, and program rituals indicate that the organization is not a distinct culture, but rather an amalgamation of several sub-cultural viewpoints attempting to find understanding under a common banner. Despite the complexity of the interactions and potential limitations of this study, several important themes emerge that may inform administrators and faculty who are developing similar start-up programs at other institutions.

Group Status

The backgrounds of SUP's members are eclectic, yet they reflect experiences that are common on most university campuses. At the time of this study, the original members of the organization had existed as a formal working group for approximately 14 months. Some members of the group have had long standing affiliations, while others, especially the part-time members, had very little contact with the other members prior to being hired. Fifteen of the twenty-one members have other work or school commitments outside of the organization. Many have held significant administrative or faculty positions at the University. The individuals that comprise the boundary spanning organization are described in Table 2.

Table 2: Boundary Spanning Organization Members by Position, Background, and Work Status

NAME	CURRENT POSITION	BACKGROUND	WORK STATUS
Robert	Dean	Faculty Member - Administrator	Full time
Kate	Coordinator	Assistant to the Vice Provost	Full-time
Mike	Consultant	Newspaper Editor	Full-time
Tom	Project Leader	Faculty Member	Part-time
Mary	Project Leader	Administrator	Full-time
Bill	Advisor to the Dean	Adjunct Faculty Member	Part-time
Fred	Consultant	Adjunct Faculty Member	Part-time
Jane	Project Leader	Librarian	Part-time
David	Consultant	Consulting	Part-time

Sam	Technology Division Liaison	Technology Support	Part-time
Seth	Research Assistant	Doctoral Student	Part-time
Ray	Research Assistant	Doctoral Student	Part-time
Kirk	Consultant	Lawyer	Part-time
Rick	Project manager	Undergraduate student	Part-time
Rebecca	Research Assistant	Doctoral Student	As needed
Shelley	Work-study student	Undergraduate Student	Part-time
Jim	Administrative Assistant	Student	Full-time
Abby	Project Manager	Administrator	Full-time
Pam	Executive Secretary	Executive Secretary	Part-time
Joan	Administrative Assistant	Administrative Assistant	Part-time
Rachel	Consultant	Administrator	Part-time

* All names are pseudonyms. Full-time considered at least 40 hours per week. Part-time typically less than 30 hours per week.

Themes

Data from observations and interviews clustered around a number of themes. They include: (1) Role ambiguity / identity formation, (2) image management/ visibility, (3) cultural differences between the SUP and other campus units, (4) composition of SUP staff, (5) responsiveness to external community service role. These themes, all of which have implications for the developing professional culture of this new organization, are developed in greater detail below. The themes can be collectively understood to represent the growing comfort with ambiguity, an overarching principle that seemed to pervade the data.

Role Ambiguity / Identity Formation

Search for identity. In meetings and in interviews, the staff indicated that the role of the office is still not clear. There were indications, particularly in strategy setting meetings, that the organization's identity is still very much being discovered, formed, and articulated. Staff members seemed to want to spend time defining, naming, and classifying SUP in a variety of ways. This exercise consumed time and energy at meetings; indeed, Kate, the organization's coordinator, appeared to sanction the activity as an appropriate use of the group's time. Staff members struggled repeatedly with the following questions: What are we about as an office? Who is our audience? How do we distinguish ourselves? What is our niche? Participants defined themselves alternately as architects, consultants,

brokers, facilitators, venture capitalists, marketers, contractors, partners, and service providers. The role and function of the Office were constant sources of discussion, speculation, and musing.

In a document entitled "About Start-Up at the [University Name]," it is noted that, "As the months progress, a clearer picture will emerge of exactly how the program will operate. Those operations will be shaped by the current needs of the University's deans and faculty, and they will evolve as those needs change." According to the document, SUP's function is deliberately vague, evolving, and responsive to its target audiences. The implicit message is that SUP's identity is fluid and dynamic, continually developing and taking on new meanings, loose and amorphous, and guided by the needs of its constituencies. The issue of identity is not necessarily in need of resolution; it is rather a process. The identity of SUP is whatever the broader university community and the external audiences need it to be. Since the needs of the University community and the external audiences are invariably different, SUP is clearly struggling with how to take on multiple and ambiguous identities simultaneously. Indeed, the ambiguity of its role represents an organizational preoccupation and, as Martin (1992) suggests, may even be considered a defining property of the organization, rather than merely a peripheral problem to be solved.

Importantly, the document is infused with the theme of rapid and unpredictable change. The suggested University response is to match rapid change and unpredictability with an organizational form that is similarly nimble and unpredictable, flexible enough to adjust and adapt to emerging and indeterminate changes. At the same time, there is a clear element of wanting to push the paradigm of distance education and the cyberspace university of the future, to enact and shape the conditions as opposed to simply reacting and responding to the idiosyncrasies of the marketplace. During the course of various meetings, SUP members viewed the role of the organization as an instrument of the University in pushing its broad objective to become a global leader in the development of a

cyberspace university, as well as a mechanism for responding to the changes of a turbulent and complex environment. In order to accomplish these twin aims, flexibility and speed in responding to the environment are paramount.

Role differentiation. Participants indicated a particular sensitivity to the threat of overlap and insufficient differentiation from other campus units. Several individuals talked of creating a role that no one else on campus would be capable of matching. It became clear that SUP is trying to determine a discrete niche as a service provider, a singular and unique place among its competitors both internally and externally. Fred, a consultant with a marketing background, couched the challenge in terms of needing to “find a way for the campus to need us.” SUP members voiced concerns about being viewed as “frivolous” by the rest of the University community or creating the perception that SUP is siphoning valuable resources away from other deserving departments, projects, or initiatives. The discussions about distinctiveness seemed to be a response to the perceived need to justify SUP’s existence. Kate, SUP’s coordinator, articulated a need to add value to the campus. She demonstrated her political adroitness in anticipating the concerns, objections, and protestations of the various deans and vice presidents to SUP’s slice of the budget. The group’s discussions about niche appeared to be directed at both the role/identity and image/visibility concerns of the Office.

Transition. In an effort to prioritize a project list that had been growing over time, a staff retreat was conducted. The retreat was an attempt at role definition and marked a transition from a strategic, abstract level to a more practical level. Kate noted, “We’ve kind of kicked around the vision and the strategy. . .but this is really the tactics. We kind of know what we’re doing, but what do we need? Is it people? Is it money? I would like us to walk out of this meeting with some realistic time frames.” The retreat and the weekly meeting that followed revealed a turning point in the life of this organization.

The Retreat as a turning point. Kate made it clear that the three hours allotted for the gathering were to be spent on tactical issues, rather than the broader issues of strategy

that typically constitute regular staff meetings. Understanding the group's propensity to engage in collective reflections on identity, Kate differentiated the staff retreat by stating at the outset that the emphasis was to be on time horizons, actions, resource needs, labor needs, and project details. Her effort to differentiate the staff retreat from other meetings was a reminder that participants normally engaged in discussions about the role of SUP. During the course of the meeting, she gently but continually had to remind participants to concentrate on tactical details, goals, timetables, priorities, and tasks.

Elements of SUP's identity were emerging as decisions were being made over what should actually be done and how it should be accomplished. This often began with a problem to be solved. Kate noted, "This is (Fortune 500 company). How can they take the middle strata of their management and help deliver programs to them, no matter where they are located. And would we be interested? Again this is one of these corporations that's coming in and saying we don't necessarily want your degree package, these specific curriculum blocks. We'd like to be able to sit down and talk with someone, to help develop these kinds of ideas. . . it's a stretch for a lot of people to say wait a minute. Look at the difficulty we've had just talking about what is our business. Who are we. . . we're at a point, at a time of evolving. We're trying to build our own model."

Kate noted toward the end of the meeting that "we're making this up as we go along," a reference to uncertainty about SUP's role. Her characterization suggests improvisation, strategy "on the fly," and negotiated identity. It's a phrase that Kate has used often to represent SUP's strategy. She utters the phrase with a sense of good cheer and casualness, as if to remind the group that it is permissible to be uncertain about the organization's future. What is becoming normative, routinized, and culturally embedded in the organization is the notion of ambiguity and a growing comfort with multiple identities, audiences, and functions. In effect, what's being standardized is the unstandardized.

Identity formation is significant not only in terms of furnishing the Office with a sense of self, but in projecting and conveying an image to its various publics. Our

observations revealed that role ambiguity influenced the manner in which organization participants wished to present and promote the enterprise.

Unclear roles, unclear goals. When the goals and objectives of the enterprise are amorphous and ill-defined, the measures of success become hard to pin down. How does SUP know how well it is performing if it is uncertain of its role in the first place? One way to address this challenge is to make the measures of success equally amorphous, in a sense matching ambiguity with ambiguity, typically referred to as isomorphism. A portion of the staff retreat (a three hour meeting held in the same room as the weekly meetings) was devoted to a prolonged discussion about how SUP should measure its success and progress. Among the indicators and criteria offered by participants were the following: Client awareness of SUP's offerings, whether "we know where we're going better than before," clarification of the Office's multiple roles, the continued provision of resources by the regents and vice presidents and the acknowledgment that SUP is shaping up to meet their expectations, the number of calls and queries the Office receives, adding value to what SUP's clients have done, as well as understanding on how the organization learns. The indicators of success furnished by the group were primarily process-oriented, rather than outcome-oriented.

Shape and be shaped. The role of SUP as an enactor, or initiator of new projects, was demonstrated in a discussion at the staff retreat in which there was some confusion over the ownership and control of a project in which SUP was partnering with another campus department. A participant at the retreat wanted to make the case that SUP's role in the partnership was to handle a narrow slice of the project, rather than direct the overarching project. Kathy mentioned that SUP didn't have to be so reactive, that "We can play a role in enacting it" instead. Agreement was voiced by many of the participants. Yet, often in practice SUP was largely reactive or opportunistic in its project selection. For example, the impetus for SUP's involvement in a financially modest partnership with an

area high school emerged when a campus organization with ties to the high school sought funding to continue its work and approached SUP.

Image management and visibility

Crafting the image of the organization for both external and internal audiences was a major theme that emerged from this study. In describing the events of the past year, Mike, a senior consultant for SUP, concluded, “the key issue for us this past year was to figure out a strategy for long term survival. Right? That was the big thing. So it doesn’t really matter what it is we want to think of ourselves as, what is much more important is what somebody gave us money to do. (Laughing) Right?” Mike’s comments show a concept of image that is grounded in the notion of market competition. What this boundary spanning organization will become will be determined by its ability to deliver an educational product that others view as valuable. Relatedly, his observation suggests that SUP’s identity may be a function of not only how the organization perceives itself, but also how relevant audiences perceive the organization.

Internal. Constructing an image of the organization for internal constituencies often developed as a result of informal opportunities that were perceived by members of the organization as image enhancing. Demonstrating competence in the name of the organization to internal audiences often occurred in a haphazard manner, based on personal friendships or past relations. In a meeting discussing the organization’s involvement in a World Wide Web consulting venture for campus departments, Ray, a graduate student, explained, “We’ll [Seth and Ray] be speaking with friends and they’ll ask what are you doing with the web? And we’ll be looked at as people with expertise because of what we’ve done [create a web site]. The amount of time we’ve invested is pretty small, we’ve not gone about it in a real systematic way. This is a sort of consulting role that we’ve gotten into just because we know some people. . .and of course we can put the [SUP] label on it or create a joint project.”

External. Publications developed by the University's Alumni Association, for example, portray the organization as technologically advanced, but not off-putting for the non-technical. Emphasis is placed on the development of alumni communities and the role that the organization and its technological expertise can play in fostering university-alumni connections. The organization is presented as sensitive to the needs of the market. The "approach is first to build on existing on-campus courses that use computers and existing distance learning courses, then to launch new courses and programs as they are needed" (Alumni Magazine, p. 30).

Documents prepared for a briefing to the University executive officers on the organization show that the organizational definition used in the briefing is nearly identical to the definition that appears on the organization's web site, which was developed by Seth and Ray, both doctoral students. The answer to the question, What is the Start-Up Program? is portrayed consistently to both internal and external constituents using dual communication techniques - electronic media and face to face contact in meetings. The briefing material contains references to a strong service orientation both to external and internal partners.

At the staff retreat, Kate announced the acquisition of "prime real estate" in the graduate library that could be used to showcase SUP, and she invited ideas about how the office could leverage the space to gain maximum visibility. The suggestions that flowed from the group centered around uses that serve to explain or convey something about SUP; participants discussed it as a public relations opportunity. There was less concern about the content of space than there was about creating a visible presence for SUP in a prominent campus location. There was also evidence of self-consciousness in not wanting to appear too obvious in its public relations initiatives. Kate mentioned that she wanted to avoid the appearance of "posturing." Visibility and image were such a preoccupation, in fact, that in a later discussion about measures of success, one participant suggested that "getting the word out" about SUP was a sufficient indicator.

SUP's concern with its campus visibility and image was reflected in one meeting in which Kate discussed the need for an annual report. She mentioned that the Office was nearly a year old, and no progress reports of any type had been issued by SUP to describe its mission, function, or activities to internal and external publics. Kate asked for ideas about how the annual report should "look and feel," and the suggestions she received indicated an emphasis on image management, including building a case for SUP's legitimacy. Participants noted that the report should be about marketing, persuasion and propaganda, education, and the establishment of identity. Kate's interpretation of the annual report was that it should approximate a report to corporate shareholders. "Given our budget, what have we returned to the University [name]?", she asked. "What have we done with the University's resources?" Kate had anticipated that some deans might say, "If the Start-Up Program is getting money, I must not be getting money for something I'm doing." Her idea was that by considering its return on investment, the legitimacy of the Office could perhaps be substantiated more convincingly. Sam, a liaison from the technology division of the University, noted in an earlier staff meeting that "one of the things we're trying to do and need to do is sell ourselves to faculty on campus," a comment that may be understood in terms of the perceived need to develop broader awareness about SUP among the university community.

We observed that this sense of urgency to create an annual report for SUP quickly faded as an organizational priority. The focus of the portion of the organization that we observed appeared to shift from a concern over conveying an appropriate image of itself to the campus community to actually taking on projects that might benefit constituents both on and off campus. For instance, a major multi-partner arrangement aimed at increasing the economic viability of the state through flexible educational opportunities for industry created several projects that moved organization members away from an earlier period of self-reflection. This coincided with a precipitous decline in the regularly scheduled meetings that often served as focal points for organizational introspection.

Cultural differences

"SUP" and "The institution". At several points during our engagement in the field, it became clear that there are significant differences between SUP culture and the other cultures in its orbit. For example, in a discussion of SUP's role as a central repository for the entire University community, Kate cautioned that the institutional culture values decentralization, suggesting that the Office might experience resistance to its efforts to serve as a centralized campus resource. In a meeting of the leadership team Robert pointed out that the organization might have difficulty in integrating with the rest of the University. Because the approach to campus governance was highly decentralized, he believed that the organization was facing an historical problem based on differences in culture. As a result, it would be difficult to initiate and implement changes that SUP envisioned for the university as a whole.

There is evidence of some frustration as the generally progressive SUP "groupies" encountered a University culture they perceived as conservative, protectionist, and suspicious. For example, in talking about SUP's involvement in promoting the University's summer programs, Kate mentioned that some deans and academic administrators were expressing concern that SUP was trying to control who is admitted to their schools, an inappropriate role they felt threatened the academic quality of their schools and programs. Mike and Sam voiced strong reactions to Kate's announcement, frustrated by their lack of understanding about what drives the beliefs of academics.

"Idea people" and "doers". Another salient cultural difference that we discovered from our interview with David, a World Wide Web consultant, was his differentiation of "idea people" and "doers" within SUP. Idea people were primarily those with a strictly academic background; doers were characterized as those with some sort of entrepreneurial preference. David characterized SUP as an idea organization. The primary disadvantage of an idea orientation, according to David, was that SUP members sought to generate and exchange ideas without actually executing or implementing them.

David also expressed frustration in his role as a consultant to the Office, mainly because his instincts as an entrepreneur were to move the SUP agenda forward swiftly and decisively, yet he constantly found himself apologizing for impatiently “trying to push certain things in meetings.” For example, he noted that, “I feel like we talk a lot...and I want us to sort of get past that, and yet it seems like we just keep talking more and more.”

Composition

Distributed network. We observed that the structure of the organization blended physical proximity and remoteness, that is, all of the organization’s members were not located in the same space nor did they meet together with regularity. We found that some members of the organization did not know each other, while others met only with the Dean of the program. As Table 2 reveals, most of the staff have other significant commitments beyond their work with the organization and therefore, work only part-time on SUP related projects. Decisions to hire new staff were typically at the discretion of Robert, Kate, Mike or Tom. We discovered that electronic communication, typically email, served as a vital link to all members of the organization. We frequently observed members suggesting to take specific conversations that did not benefit the entire group “off line,” which meant that it should be communicated to specific members of the group via email. We observed several cases where no electronic follow up took place, but in many cases meeting agendas and individual contributions to organization-wide documents were exchanged in a timely and efficient manner. Although the term virtual organization is most often used to describe member’s participation in an organization from far ranging geographical locations, the disparate nature of this organization - spread out around the campus - took on a virtual presence.

SUP is a distributed community of professionals, in that much of the brainpower behind the enterprise is not physically located in a central office. Rather, an ad hoc arrangement is in force, wherein staff and graduate students from across the University divide their duties between SUP and other commitments. On any given day, the cast of

characters in the office was likely to change. A spatial analysis revealed that there was a sense of impermanence (Mike had still not replaced the nameplate of the former inhabitant of his office), temporariness (Matt was working for a short while in Kate's office; a significant portion of SUP's work is done by graduate assistants and other temporary employees), and fluidity (a stream of individuals routinely flows into and out of the Office to do occasional project work). SUP is, in a sense, a molecular work site; the project oriented nature of SUP's agenda means that its business is conducted in spaces all over campus.

Organizing for work. At the staff retreat, David developed a timeline on the chalkboard and arranged teams of individuals and project titles under a corresponding completion date. His action was significant in that he was graphically representing how the Office was to accomplish its work -- through the use of project teams which were flexibly designed to substitute and rotate members according to their interest or expertise. He explained to the group that each project would have a project manager or coordinator ultimately responsible for the team's progress. Up until this point in our field observations and interviews with SUP staffers, the concept of project teams had not been elucidated. It seemed to unfold and develop at the retreat.

Meetings were participatory, with the group's suggestions actively solicited by Kate. Particularly in the strategy setting sessions, Kate honored the special expertise of each of the players by seeking their input. The choice of descriptors to depict organization participants is telling. Members were referred to as "groupies" at the weekly meetings. The term "groupies" seemed to represent the loose affiliation of participants. At face value, it is a lighthearted manner of addressing the participants; on a deeper level, it signals some difficulty in classifying this ad hoc mixture of individuals as SUP staff. Indeed, Kate has had to invent a new term for the confederation of graduate assistants, temporary appointments, full-time staff, and expert consultants that comprise SUP's ranks.

Tradeoffs. One way to think about the composition of SUP is in terms of its costs and benefits, assets and liabilities. One of the assets or benefits of the arrangement is that it produces a network of University professionals from different offices that can depend on one another to accomplish certain tasks. This was demonstrated in the staff retreat when one participant asked for another participant's assistance in getting a particular project on the priority list at a unit that had been unresponsive to that point. The value of working through fellow participants became clear as tactical details were discussed. Mike, for example, needed someone in a campus service unit to "step up to the plate" and take responsibility for helping to actualize a SUP project; he was able to commission Sam's assistance in getting it in front of the right people. We witnessed an element of collaboration between members of the group that helped to facilitate complex project work. The representation of multiple campus offices in SUP meetings allowed group members to assist one another in expediting the project agenda.

Group members seemed to recognize the potential liability of a part-time arrangement. In a strategy setting meeting, it was suggested that the Office adopt a prime contractor role by outsourcing those activities (Web site construction, for example) that it was not interested in owning. A discussion ensued in which it was suggested that if SUP did not "own" the production capability, then there was nothing to ensure that hired sub-contractors would deliver services on SUP's timetable. So, there was recognition that, while SUP would stand to gain a broadened network of technical experts, it would not be assured the same accountability or sense of immediacy as would be expected with a full-time cadre of employees.

David observed that, "We all give a little bit, and we're hoping that those little bits come together to actually mean something. I'm just not sure that's happened yet because I don't know if you can have that critical mass based on little pieces of commitment." Indeed, one of David's criteria for the development of a professional culture was a substantial enough budget so that full-time employees could be installed.

One of the most culturally revealing remarks was offered at the staff retreat, when Kate acknowledged that an undergraduate student was to be brought on board shortly to assist in a project. In making the announcement, Kate counseled the group to remember that the new employee “is a student first, lest we all forget.” What is telling about Kate’s comment is that it illustrates a degree of comfort with the notion that the student’s association with the Office is not expected to be his principal priority.

SUP Responsive to External Community - Service Role

The internal-external duality of SUP’s function is described in a letter written by the Provost proposing a change in Robert’s title. In the letter, the Provost suggested that the new opportunities and competitive challenges of rapidly changing technology necessitate a “skilled and knowledgeable person who can aid the academic units in their own responses and who can represent the broader university interests across the many external constituencies.” The accompanying action request for title change noted that, “The quality of the University’s campus-based education and research activities provides an opportunity for the University to broaden the community served by our educational programs and knowledge resources.” The objective of SUP is to “extend access,” “expand beyond residential degree-oriented programs,” and focus on “serving new people” (Campus Newspaper, January 27, 1995). These comments clearly represent the University administration’s intention for the Start-Up Program to be a boundary spanning unit with an apparatus for serving new markets of learners.

Interestingly, we found that “market” language was being used by a contingent of SUP participants in strategy setting sessions. That is, the notion of SUP as a business enterprise had begun to take root to the point that members were using marketplace imagery to describe the organization’s activities. For example, there was talk of distribution channels, commodity services, manufacturing and retail roles, customers, products, and deliverables. Such jargon became normalized during the course of meetings so that all participants were employing it to illustrate their conceptions of SUP’s market oriented role.

A key question concerns how this new unit -- SUP -- will be expected to both understand its market orientation and develop expertise in responding to market conditions. The answer partly lies in the composition of the SUP team -- a network of professionals from several campus departments and other occupations, some of which are externally oriented.

Implications

As the boundaries between higher education institutions and their many publics become more blurred, we argue that the role of boundary spanning organizations and the people who staff them will become increasingly important. Understanding the experiences and cultural context of the persons who comprise these organizations is one way to enhance the effectiveness of relationship building for colleges and universities. The themes described in this study have implications for administrators and faculty members who are beginning new boundary spanning organizations.

1. *Prepare to devote a substantial amount of time to managing the expectations and impressions of internal and external constituencies.* The activities of boundary spanning organizations may be visible to many constituencies both on and off campus. This visibility creates greater pressure on the organization to account for its actions and provide “value-added” to the community at large. The pressure may be even greater for new programs operating within a boundary spanning role. As the findings suggest, significant energy was expended in thinking about and crafting information for external audiences. Few conversations in the weekly staff meetings failed to consider how governmental, corporations or faculty for example, would view a particular decision. New boundary spanning organizations may also have the added burden of being perceived as competitors for scarce resources. Justifying one’s existence can consume valuable time that could be devoted to developing new products or researching strategy options, which are critical for an emergent organization.

Prior to launching the boundary spanning program, a plan for image management and communication should be considered by the organization's leaders. SUP's staffing arrangements indicate that Mike's role in the organization, at least initially, would be to serve as a media and public relations consultant. His influence has been instrumental in crafting a unified image of the SUP through his input on documents, speeches and print materials. In addition to staffing considerations, planning might begin with a comprehensive listing of potential constituents, their perceived image of the boundary spanning organization and a tentative strategy for addressing those perceptions. Focus groups or consultation with influential persons within and outside of the institution might provide the necessary information for such a strategy.

2. *Attend to how people communicate as well as what they communicate.* The disparate nature of the organization described in this study points to the need for a flexible communication structure. The computing environment of the University includes an electronic mail (e-mail) system. The findings suggest that e-mail was central to the effective communication between organization members whose scattered offices and hectic schedules did not permit them to meet face-to-face more than once a week. The computing and telephone resources of the university allowed members to communicate among themselves and with key actors within and outside of the university very easily. Institutions with a less robust computing and telecommunication environment may find a disparate organizational structure such as SUP's less effective without such resources.

The mission of SUP requires that the team consist of members from varied backgrounds and skills. Our findings indicate that this boundary spanning organization was staffed by persons with backgrounds that reflected either a "business" or "higher education" orientation. During the meetings that we observed, terms particular to one group were often used with the assumption that every member understood the meaning of what the other was saying. Business oriented members spoke of markets and competitive position. Higher education oriented members discussed faculty receptiveness and

department politics. Terminology that had applicability in one group might be perceived as less illustrative to the other. Persons leading a boundary spanning effort should understand the role that language may play in enhancing or hindering the effectiveness of the organization's members.

3. *Resist the temptation to judge new organizations by conventional standards.* Simply stated, unconventional organizational forms may be better suited for similarly unconventional indicators of success, particularly in instances where the mission and goals of the venture are purposefully ill-structured and designed to evolve over time. Criteria by which other organizations are evaluated, such as productivity, profitability, or efficiency, may not be appropriate measures for a boundary spanning organization that is still trying to determine its goals and objectives. Our findings illustrate that SUP's impact on the University's overarching vision may not be felt for some time as relationships are cultivated and structures and routines are put into place. Because of the imprecise nature of its outcomes and unclear expectations for its multiple roles, standard evaluations of SUP's effectiveness have become problematic. The response of the organization's members has been to create new measures of accountability that better reflect the work and contributions of the group since its inception.

Administrators with responsibility for evaluating the effectiveness or success of a new boundary spanning organization may find it helpful to consider the criteria suggested by SUP members, including how the organization learns, client awareness of the organization's offerings, role clarification, and a determination of the value that is added in partnerships with other entities. While these indicators are more process-oriented than outcome-oriented, they tend to better match the complexity and ambiguity that is a defining feature of boundary spanning organizations.

4. *Get comfortable with ambiguity.* Boundary spanning organizations are often asked to play buffering or bridging roles for the core of an organization (Scott, 1992). These roles constantly place the boundary spanner in contact with actors who possess differing agendas

and needs. Similarly, rapid changes in the organization's environment, particularly in the area of information technology, have challenged SUP members to stay abreast of external developments and advances in a variety of fields. The composition of the organization - an amalgamation of part-time and full-time employees from various backgrounds - further complicate the SUP's management and direction. Our observations of SUP suggest that the volatile nature of change, organizational composition and competing demands from its many constituents have created a culture of ambiguity. This is clearly different from a culture that possesses ambiguous elements, in that fluidity, uncertainty and opportunity for change were the norm for the SUP members that we observed. One member pointed out that the organization should be able to set a course on Monday, and by Friday, given a change in the environment, "slam on the brakes" and go in the opposite direction. Attitudes of playfulness and experimentation may exemplify the comfort that is needed to function effectively in a new, boundary spanning organization.

The normative role of ambiguity in organizational culture, as proposed by Martin (1992), may be an uncomfortable and unusual proposition for participants who are more accustomed to structures or processes with relatively uncontested boundaries and functions. At the very least, a culture of ambiguity, such as SUP, raises important questions for colleges and universities considering similar programs. Are the staff of such programs comfortable with ambiguous situations and willing to be guided by the intent of the organization's leadership? Is efficiency undermined by ambiguity or does it make the organization more adaptive and therefore able to save time and money by reversing poor decisions quickly? Finally, what is the potential toll that ambiguity may have on the creativity, intelligence gathering and resiliency of organizations over time? These questions should be considered within the specific institutional contexts of new boundary spanning programs.

Conclusions

The findings from our study suggest the need for a new language in talking about emerging organizational forms that span multiple boundaries in colleges and universities. Specifically, we propose that a boundary spanning culture may be an appropriate way to characterize the processes undertaken by group members to create an organizational identity, craft a public image, manage cultural differences with other entities, confront the challenges of part-time staff, and respond to external exigencies. Ambiguity appears to be the defining property of a boundary spanning organizational culture, and it is the ability of participants to make sense of such a condition that ultimately determines the organization's various roles and activities.

This notion of a boundary spanning organizational culture departs significantly from traditional ideas about organizational culture. The focus on ambiguity as a core definitional feature of boundary spanning cultures complicates the dichotomous terms (i.e., internal focus versus external focus; order versus flexibility) in which organizational culture has historically been represented (see, for example, Quinn, 1988). Consequently, several questions are suggested for future investigations of this emerging phenomenon.

A key question is whether a case can be made for distinct boundary spanning cultures in other organizations within colleges and universities that pivot on the same idea of ambiguity, complexity, unpredictability, and permeable boundaries found in SUP. As institutions and their various units organize for future imperatives, perhaps examples of a boundary spanning organizational culture will become more ubiquitous in higher education.

Future research might also investigate how adaptable organizations negotiate the apparent tension between allowing their identity to emerge as it is guided by market forces and enacting an identity in a more deliberate and intentional fashion. This idea of "shaping and being shaped" was a salient one for SUP.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine the life cycle of boundary spanning organizational cultures to determine how such issues as member commitment, productivity, shared sense of identity, and goal orientation change as the organization develops. Clearly,

the immaturity of SUP influenced the organization's efforts to define its relationships with both internal and external constituencies, identify its various roles as a service provider, and struggle with issues of image management. It remains to be seen how the strategy and substance of future SUP initiatives might change as the organization becomes a more seasoned player.

On balance, these and other questions have the potential to extend knowledge of the development of boundary spanning culture in higher education. The organizing principles embodied in boundary spanning units, as observed in this study, indicate a need for scholars and practitioners to think differently about the phenomena they observe and develop sharper analytic tools for describing and explaining the properties of new organizational forms. The role that boundary spanning culture plays in the establishment and development of new organizational forms such as the virtual university (e.g., Western Governors Association), technology transfer offices, or economic development partnerships is likely to come under closer scrutiny as the pressure on these organizations to respond to new educational challenges increases. Comparative analysis across differing organizational contexts may help to provide generalizable data capable of enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of these emerging organizational forms.

This research project has examined the cultural development of a new boundary spanning organization at a large, mid-western research university and identified several themes underlying that culture. We have suggested several implications that administrators and faculty members should consider as they plan for and create similar programs on their campuses. Its purpose has been to reconstruct an understanding of the scope and nature of culture as it is experienced by persons creating the culture itself. As institutions of higher education continue to re-conceive the academic enterprise, and as colleges and universities look increasingly to an agile and entrepreneurial organizational form as a model for accomplishing their strategic objectives, the role of organizational participants in

reinterpreting and making sense of their work will be a key aspect of enacting a vision for the future.

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