Liberal Education

Faculty Leadership and Institutional Change

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Horizontal and Vertical Structures

The Dynamics of Organization in Higher Education

Institutional effectiveness requires the tighter coupling of horizontal and vertical activities in ways that promote student learning and sustain an engaged student experience

THE ORGANIZATION of institutions of higher education has been seen as operating with ambiguous purposes in vertically oriented structures that are only loosely connected (Cohen and March 1986; Weick 1976; Mintzberg 1979). The rationale for this ambiguity is twofold: (1) to allow for creative thinking, and (2) to respect—and even encourage—the autonomy of different disciplines. But ambiguity of purpose and vertical organization are at odds with thinking and expectations in an era of accountability and assessment, in which cross-institutional, or horizontal, reporting and measurement of institutional performance are highly regarded and increasingly demanded (Callan et al. 2006). Student affairs divisions are particularly challenged, given their ambiguous purpose (to support holistic student learning and development); the perception that they are support services, rather than core academic

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functions; and their primarily historically and traditionally framed organizational structures (Fenske 1990). Student affairs divisions are appropriately scrutinized to display how their ambiguous purpose is manifested in practice via organizational effectiveness and responsiveness to institutional needs, and through documented contributions to the development and achievement of desired student outcomes (Bresciani, Zelna, and Anderson 2004; Upcraft and Schuh 1996). The ability of student affairs functional areas to document and demonstrate value provides a pertinent opportunity to reconsider the organizational nature of student affairs programs, services, activities, and systems of support (Keeling 2004).

The frequent and increasingly predictable accusation that institutions of higher education operate in "silos" is based on the primarily *vertical* organization of those institutions; their various schools, colleges, business operations, student support services, real estate and economic development arms, foundations, and athletic programs operate in parallel with one another, more focused on promoting their own internal goals and objectives than on adhering to, elucidating, or accomplishing broader institutional purposes (Kuh 1996). It is a common observation that professors in any discipline have a greater sense of community and connection with professors in that same discipline in other institutions than with professors in other disciplines in their own institution (Clark 1963; Schroeder 1999). Similarly, student affairs professionals who find career contentment in residence life are more likely to collaborate locally, regionally, and

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nationally with others who do the same work rather than to seek interdisciplinary opportunities on their home campuses.

This vertical organizational structure is reinforced by *centrifugal* forces that create decentralization and locate governance, responsibility, and resources peripherally, rather than centrally; funding models in many institutions base the allocation of resources on credit hours, which drives money into individual schools based on student enrollments in courses (Ehrenberg 2000). Schools within larger institutions compete with each other for scarce resources and almost inevitably, and often by necessity, promote their own interests rather than those of the university at large. Centralized components of the institution—such as most student affairs offices, programs, and services—may struggle for resources in this context.

In these vertically organized institutions, there are important (and essential) *horizontal* forces; similarly, given the centrifugal, decentralized nature of decision making and resource allocation, there are nonetheless certain centripetal forces that pull some decision making, governance, and control to the center of the institution (Bourgault and Lapierre 2000; Kuh 1996; Mintzberg 1979). Notable horizontal forces include, of course,
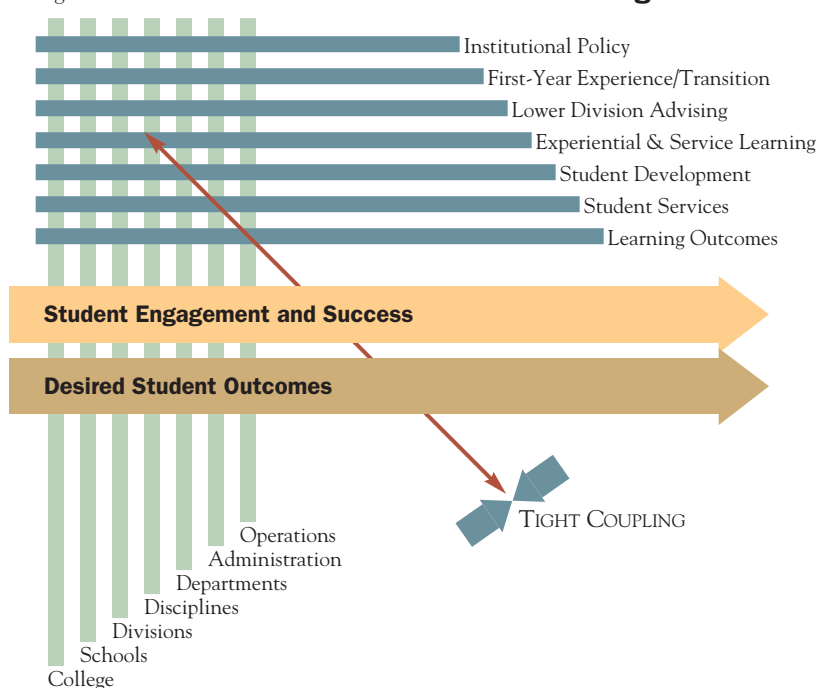
central administration (which may or may not have significant power; the extent to which power is centralized is directly related to how resources are allocated and managed), institutional accreditation, overall financial management, and certain levels of policy. But development, alumni relations, communications and marketing, enrollment management, and other core institutional functions are often performed to a greater or lesser extent by individual schools as well as by the institution as a whole. Similarly, central funding and policy development are centripetal forces—but the strength of those forces varies by institutional type, history, culture, and perceptions of the need for public accountability.

The inherent and necessary tensions between these horizontal and vertical elements generate and sustain complexity in institutions of higher education. Because each institution is of a particular type and exists in its own context (i.e., public, private, rural, urban, etc.), the vertical and horizontal structures vary in number and dimensions from institution to institution; but because they are fundamental parts of postsecondary infrastructure, they each exist in some form at every institution (see fig. 1).

Student affairs programs have a strong centripetal pull and are, of necessity, horizontal; since they (theoretically, at least) address the needs of all students in all schools, optimally they work across—and have an integrative role in relation to—the vertical structures, or silos (Dungy 2000; Kuh et al. 2005). The horizontal nature of student services is easy to see: student health and counseling programs, recreation centers, student health insurance plans, unions and student centers, and dining services are good examples; any would be difficult (and inefficient and duplicative) to implement separately in individual schools. Similarly, student policy (especially, academic and non-academic conduct) must be horizontal. First-year experience and transition programs, general education courses, student government, and lower division academic advising are other horizontal programs and services; providing them often requires collaboration between academic and student affairs (Kuh et al. 1991).

The identification of desired student learning outcomes creates a new horizontal force—accountability for producing a group of

Figure 1. **Horizontal and Vertical Structures in Higher Education**

Institutional Policy
First-Year Experience/Transition
Lower Division Advising
Experiential & Service Learning
Student Development
Student Services
Learning Outcomes

Student Engagement and Success

Desired Student Outcomes

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Operations
Administration
Departments
Disciplines
Divisions
Schools
College

outcomes for all students, regardless of their major, year in school, division, or school of enrollment within the institution. This horizontal force, finding its roots in accountability, challenges student affairs leadership to adopt a curricular approach to the assessment, conceptualization, planning, implementation, and evaluation of programmatic and student learning outcomes.

A curricular approach to supporting the student experience within student affairs allows for appropriate vertical activity while insisting on balanced horizontal functioning

From individual and programmatic action to organizational realignment

Student affairs efforts to function horizontally have been highlighted in actions to develop learning communities, promote positive and developmentally sound transitions into and out of the institution, foster academic partnerships, and respond to calls for movement away from vertical (silo) functioning (Ewell and Wellman 2007; Kuh 1996; Smith et al. 2004). An examination of these efforts reveals strong individual commitments to horizontal functioning in spite of organizational constraints (Smith et al. 2004). Individual efforts and resource-intensive programs illustrate the opportunities of implementing horizontally oriented functions and developing a more horizontal institutional orientation, but do not normally instigate or sustain organic organizational change that spurs the systematic breaking or weakening of vertical barriers and forces. Organizationally speaking, efforts to support greater horizontal functioning are often based upon the exercise of astute political savvy by inspired leaders and key influencers of opinion and through the force of strong human relations, rather than through policy-driven, mission-centered, or otherwise explicit expectations for *transdivisional* collaboration or systematic change in the structure, beliefs, or culture of the organization (Schroeder 1999). While student affairs alone cannot reasonably be expected to alter the vertical and disciplinary structure of the academy (and cannot impose such a restructuring on academic or other divisions), much can be done through engagement in the organic and systematic realignment of programs and services that support student learning and success, including, but not limited to, traditional student affairs programs and services. Such organizational realignment can be fostered by a curricular approach to supporting the student experience through programs, services, and policy.

A curricular approach to supporting the student experience helps to generate a scope and sequence of programmatic activities centered upon desired student learning outcomes. For example, student affairs officers can determine the desired learning of students at different developmental levels and connect those desired learning goals to programmatic and organizational elements. The aim would be to have a vertical force for organizational functioning that guides the extent to which each program should contribute to the acquisition of learning objectives, and a horizontal force that pushes programs to best meet the evolving developmental and learning needs of students as they progress through the institution (see fig. 2, next page).

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Figure 2. **Scope and Sequence Matrix for Undergraduate Students Based on Selected Developmental Vectors***

	First Year	Second Year
Developing Competence (intellectual, physical/manual, and social/interpersonal)	Ability to access student learning support resources; Evidence of basic critical thinking skills.	Describes benefits of student learning resources to first-year students; Ability to act as a campus advocate.
	Ability to demonstrate proficiency in physical education, athletics, dance, or other activity that documents translation of abstract concepts into tangible products.	Active member of student recreation, intramural, or athletic activities; Engagement with campus or community fine arts efforts.
Managing Emotions	Actively engages in programs or service learning efforts that offer skills-based education in conflict mediation, respect for differences, or participation in community dialogue.	Through formal or ad hoc participation, serves as a peer mentor in housing/residential life programs, judicial programs, alcohol and other drug education programs, peer counseling programs, or women, LGBT, or other minority student programs.
Moving through Autonomy Toward Interdependence	Demonstrates adherence to personal beliefs and values through engagement in peer dialogues, individuation from parents or other familial caretakers, and ability to take ownership for one's circumstances.	Engages in programs or service learning activities that contribute to an ethical and respectful living environment; Advances a respectful community of student citizenry on and off campus; Demonstrates evidence of reasonable financial competencies.
Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships	Ability to engage in productive and respectful relationships with roommates or peers.	Contribution as an active member of student mentoring or leadership group.
Establishing Identity	Ability to reflect on the impact of peer pressure as it pertains to one's sense of self, sense of culture, gender, race, and sexual orientation.	Engages in learning activities and programs that allow students to explore diversity, equity, and human rights. Gains comfort individuating from organizations or cliques that prescribe standards based on socioeconomic class, gender, or body image.
Developing Purpose	Ability to access and proactively use personal counseling, professional or faculty advising, and career counseling services.	Full commitment to a major course of study; Ability to describe one's career goals and differentiate career from job; Development of a portfolio or other document that illustrates links between personal, academic, service or experiential learning and career goals.
Developing Integrity	Engages in programs and courses of study that allow for examination personal values on a range of issues. Works with an adviser to register for a balance of courses that includes the arts, sciences, religion, and international issues.	Demonstrates social competencies that include ability to contrast personal beliefs with those of other and differing beliefs; Ability to engage in thoughtful discourse on social issues; Demonstrates empathy.

*Developmental vectors after A.W. Chickering and L. Reisser, *Education and Identity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

Third Year	Fourth Year
Contributes as a leader to supplemental instruction, tutoring, peer education, or other student support services.	Through assessment and evaluation activities acts as an adviser to the senior student affairs officer in matters pertinent to the quality of student support services.
Engages in program conceptualization and planning for recreation, athletic, intramural, or fine arts activities.	Acts as an advocate to the institution about the benefits to the community of quality recreation and fine arts activities.
Assesses the need for, plans, and implements student-led peer education, housing/residential life, peer counseling, or service learning efforts that seek to engage undergraduate students in skills-based education that results in civility and community engagement.	Synthesizes program and student learning outcomes data from relevant programs; makes recommendations to senior student affairs officers about the quality and productivity of programs relevant to this area of student development.
Provides leadership to campus and community housing efforts; Through formal and ad hoc activities provides community mentorship to peers in-classroom and out-of-classroom activities; Manages finances effectively and acts as a resource to peers.	Acts as an adviser to senior campus leadership; Assesses quality and productivity of campus efforts that seek to build students' capacity to develop healthy interdependence from peers and family.
Contributes to formal organizational efforts to broaden leadership opportunities for undergraduate students; Develops and convenes student leadership retreats, symposia, or intercollegiate conferences to explore service and experiential learning.	Works closely with the institution's senior leadership to link service or experiential learning to general education programs and specific courses of study; acts as a peer adviser to senior capstone projects.
Engages in student and community leadership opportunities that support positive youth development, healthy parenting, and human rights.	Acts as adviser to the institution's leadership on matters related to equality, supporting first year students as they transition into the institution, and contributes to evaluation of current programs to ensure access and equity.
Active engagement in internship, study abroad, or comprehensive service learning activities; Provides peer leadership in chosen fields of interest and formal study.	Has a plan for post-bachelors work (e.g., graduate school application process, job interviews, etc); Adheres to high quality of academic and campus standards that promote the brand identity of the institution; Develops relationships with alumni and seeks opportunities to advance the institution. Knows who he or she is.
Actively engages in debates, institution and community supported events that promote critical thinking. Can synthesize life lessons from opposing viewpoints (e.g., pro-life and pro-choice; the role of women in the workplace; same-sex marriage, etc).	Engages in institutional efforts to examine general education requirements that seek to develop "whole human beings;" Acts as a student spokesperson for the institution on matters of critical thinking, student development, and academic rigor.

The identification of desired student learning outcomes creates a new horizontal force

A curricular approach to supporting the student experience within student affairs allows for appropriate vertical activity while insisting on balanced horizontal functioning. The former occurs when each department within the division is held to its respective discipline-specific standards. The latter, however, gains durability through imposing a common set of expectations across departments and then, through assessment of learning outcomes, accruing a body of evidence to gauge accountability. The centrifugal forces of traditional departmental functioning, such as budgeting and tradition, are balanced by the centripetal force of common learning objectives owned collectively by student affairs—which, in turn, is embedded within overall institutional accountability for desired student outcomes. A similar analysis—and approach—would, of course, apply more generally to the institution's overall support for student success, which depends upon the integration of learning experiences as much as depth of learning in a discipline or major (Ewell and Wellman 2007; Kuh et al. 2006).

Student affairs organizational realignment, then, is based upon the centripetal force of common learning outcome objectives. As an example, rather than the developmental competency of ability to manage conflict being the primary responsibility of those specially trained in conflict management, outcomes associated with conflict management are shared across a system horizontally. Staff members own collectively the outcome of assisting students with managing conflict. The vertically organized units that direct service delivery must realign themselves to work together to meet the student learning outcome of conflict management skills. In curricular thinking, the modules, or service delivery units, must both share a common outcome and array their curriculum to be appropriately developmental and sequential. This is not the same thing as saying that every conflict resolution effort must be the same; instead, it says that conflict resolution programs and activities must be conscious of one another's existence, coordinated in a sound way that demonstrates integrity of purpose, and designed, delivered,

Achieving horizontal integration is the primary functional characteristic of an institution for which the entire campus has become a learning community

and assessed collaboratively.

These principles suggest the need for a level of organization and horizontal integration of services that far exceeds traditional "cooperation" or "collaboration" within divisions of student affairs—and for similar integration among activities that support learning provided throughout the institution (Kuh 1996). Achieving such horizontal integration is the primary functional characteristic of an institution for which the entire campus has become a learning community (Keeling 2004); it is that integration that permits learning to occur, as Whitt (1999) has said, in "every nook and cranny" of the institution. Horizontal integration supports the *coupling* of programs, services, and activities in time, space, and geography. Research on the antecedents and correlates of student success (defined as the acquisition of key learning and developmental outcomes) reveals that the tightness of coupling of programs, services, and activities is linked to levels of achievement (Hearn 2006). The degree to which tight coupling occurs (and is possible) is related to both policy and institutional culture.

Horizontal programmatic and curricular organization is expressed in a myriad of tangible ways. The change from focus on workforce development to lifelong career skills in community colleges over the past thirty years offers many examples of how horizontal linkages enhance higher education practice. In a recent *New York Times* article (Frerking 2007), community colleges that are considered successful list the following attributes that intentionally and actively support student development: articulation agreements with colleges and universities that students are most likely to transfer into, thereby supporting students as they progress from year one to four-year degree completion; access to local arts, recreational, or vocational options that offer local, regional, or international internships, service learning, or other experiential learning for credit opportunities; learning communities that synthesize an array of life skills (e.g., time management) with content (e.g., English) courses; professors working and teaching in teams, including buildings and offices that allow professors and staff from multiple

disciplines to share work space; required orientation and one-on-one advising, including a clear expectation that students develop and document career goals; on-campus programs devoted to providing students exposure to renowned artists, poets, scientists, and scholars; an environment that is aesthetically conducive to learning; academic programs that teach across disciplines (e.g., Great Books programs); expectations that students work to develop their own slate of honors classes; student involvement in professional honoraries or associations; and a focus on self-exploration of personal values via journaling. Many of these same programs have been shown to be factors in supporting and enhancing student success more generally (Hearn 2006). Moreover, enhancing student success means that these programs share the common thread of requiring horizontal institutional functioning to operate effectively.

While many universities may have some or even many of the programs and courses listed above, it seems that the main difference is the intentionality and expectations of community colleges. That is, many community colleges seem actively to engage in horizontality free from the four-year institutional pressures that result in unbalanced verticality (such as faculty promotion and tenure criteria that privilege research and publishing over teaching and close engagement with students). On the other hand, the demands on faculty—and institutional purposes—in four-year institutions are different from the demands in most community colleges; expectations of disciplinary excellence demonstrated by scholarly achievement, original research, and peer-reviewed presentations and publications are higher, and those expectations drive verticality. Verticality is also reinforced by the very nature of comprehensive universities; their component schools, faculties, and centers often compete for funds and power. All of which is to say that the exercise of significant institutional will—and challenge to traditional structures and policies—are required for most four-year institutions, especially research-intensive comprehensive universities, to create greater horizontal energy. Institutions can develop a greater focus on horizontal functioning—which is necessary to enhancing student success—without sacrificing disciplinary excellence; this is especially true, and equally essential, in undergraduate studies.

In order for universities to create a comprehensive culture of evidence that actively supports outcome-oriented learning by the whole student, programs and systems of support must be developed *across* disciplines (Braxton 2006). That practice must include and integrate services and learning opportunities traditionally located in divisions of student affairs with courses of study traditionally in academic affairs. No longer can "full learning" be offered only to those students who request it or have the instincts to search it out. If institutions of higher education are to create and provide to the public a body of evidence that documents student learning and development across the academy, then they must intentionally develop and implement comprehensive learning opportunities that link faculty to staff and courses to out-of-classroom learning activities. Developing these linkages is an interdependent, energy-requiring process that results in tighter coupling; once tighter coupling is achieved, additional energy (monitoring, assessment, leadership) is necessary to maintain and strengthen it (Ewell and Wellman 2007).

These changes resonate with the principles of student development illustrated in figure 2. That is, they illustrate strategies for supporting not only student engagement with content, but also the more comprehensive effort to create a purposeful learning environment—a topography of learning—that expects learning to happen everywhere and all the time. That sort of learning results in learners who know more than "what;" they know "why, when, and under what circumstances"; they are intellectually curious and are more likely to transfer that set of competencies across their life spans.

It is in respect to policy and culture that colleges and universities do or do not embrace the opportunity that assessment provides to link high standards with daily practice and student outcomes. Assessment, as a strong horizontal force and tool, both reflects and demands closer coupling in the interest of producing and documenting desired student outcomes. Achieving such coupling requires the exercise of significant institutional will, which in itself is a combined force of variable capacity, will, and strength—what may be considered institutional purpose. Institutional purpose is generated and sustained in direct proportion to elements of institutional culture

and policy. If there is focused and powerful institutional purpose, assessment can become a strong force to bring disparate elements of the campus together in the interest of common goals; absent such strong purpose, though, assessment can seem incidental, suspicious, and annoying. Without the continuous application of energy and institutional will, coupling weakens, linkages dissolve, and, through a kind of organizational entropy, the centrifugal overcomes what is centripetal and vertical structures dominate horizontal ones.

Institutional action steps

Ensuring transformative institutional environments where learning happens everywhere and all the time, then, requires intentionality. Intentionality can be articulated through a process of organizational reinvigoration and strategic realignment. Organic transformation often begins with institutional self-assessment, a process that engages practitioners' critical self-reflection as to current practices, cultural expectations, and existing communication and collaborative pathways. Identification of current practices is a precursor to the development, or affirmation, of commonly held desired student learning outcomes and programs associated with those outcomes. Overall student learning outcomes derive from the institution's mission, vision, and values—and from its commitments to students—not from a restatement of existing programs; that is, desired outcomes represent *what should be,* not necessarily *what has been* or *what is*. So it is the process of developing, instituting, and assessing student learning outcomes that leads necessarily to institutional review at every level—and, often,

to reallocation of resources. The process through which these outcomes are developed, then, is not the usual incremental form of strategic planning that more often lionizes the past than prepares for the future. Instead, it focuses on the way that the institution's work is, or is not, aligned with its vision; that examination leads inevitably to questions of structure and organization.

The ability to do good work within one's discipline or program area must include both competence in a specific area of knowledge or function and commitment to horizontally defined and broadly held student outcomes. Just as a career counselor cannot focus exclusively on career content and counseling, but must also address the development of cognitive complexity and citizenship skills, so a physicist must devote some of her attention to supporting student engagement, understanding and addressing student learning, and assessing the contributions of her courses to critical thinking and problem-solving capacities.

Both because of greater internal and external scrutiny and in support of the desire of ethical professionals to do their best work, the articulation of desired learning outcomes and the creation of a strong rationale for how programs and services address those outcomes are essential to telling a convincing performance story. The process of developing commonly held student learning outcomes requires a strong centripetal force along horizontal lines. Common planning time, dialogue on beliefs, respect for disciplinary and other differences, and a commitment to follow through a process to identify learning outcomes are necessary components of this process. Collaboration and common purpose are further challenged, but ultimately strengthened, when programs, services, and indeed all vertically organized units are then asked to define how their programs specifically address the identified learning outcomes. The process of creating common outcomes and then connecting programs, services, and units will likely identify areas of strong coupling between current activities and desired learning, along with areas of weak coupling. Of course not all programs, services, or units will address each outcome in the same ways or with the same emphasis, but the collective impact of the work in all programs, services, and units should be aimed at supporting and advancing every desired outcome.

Conclusion

The traditional structures of most colleges and universities do not naturally support the integration of learning experiences, the establishment of institution-wide desired learning outcomes that define the overall, transformative goals of engagement with higher education, or the assessment of the institution's effectiveness in achieving those goals. A curricular approach to learning, student development, assessment, and retention depends on creating horizontal structures, forces, and dynamics that intersect with vertical systems and structures; institutional effectiveness requires the tighter coupling of horizontal and vertical activities in ways that promote student learning and sustain an engaged student experience. Implementing such an approach will require the development and exercise of significant institutional will to support a substantial transformation of assumptions, attitudes, values, and systems within postsecondary institutions.   □

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