

The Changing Nature of Organizational Leadership and Culture in Academic Work

By William G. Tierney

I have long argued that leadership is a cultural construct embedded in symbolic processes (Tierney, 1988, 1991). By culture, I refer to the informal codes and shared assumptions of individuals who participate in an organization. An organization's members shape and are shaped by the symbols and rituals of the institution as well as the unique history from which the organization derives. Leadership also suggests a way of interacting not only with individuals within an organization, but also those outside of it. On the one hand, an organization's culture may be one that eschews involvement with others; on the other, a culture of an organization may have porous borders where the members are expected to interact with multiple external constituencies.

As a cultural activity, leadership is a learned behavior such that individuals are socialized to what the organization expects. Obviously, leaders can enter a culture and not fulfill the members' expectations. A general, for example, with extensive experience in the norms of the military, may experience difficulty adapting to a more discursive culture such as a college or university. The military is linear, hierarchical, and operates through clear chains of command. Universities are more flat and exhibit shared power. Some individuals are surely able to adapt and learn when they enter a different organizational culture; all cultures also, to some extent, adapt to new entrants.

When individuals learn about the organization, they are being socialized to a culture that has been created and changed over time. Cultural change is important insofar as a static organization suggests an inflexible stance with regard to the environment; at the same time, if a culture simply adapts to the environment, then the strength of the culture will appear absent—the organizational 'glue' that binds members to one another will be non-existent (Chaffee and Tierney, 1988). Indeed, one key challenge for any organization and its leaders is to be able to hold the culture together while at the same time adapt to external challenges, threats, and opportunities.

Obvious examples of organizations in the throes of change are postsecondary institutions. Technological, economic, social, and globalizing forces have created demands on college and universities such that they are facing more changes today than at any time in the last fifty years. These changes are not simply an improvement from the use of a typewriter to the internet, or a minor downturn in an institution's budget. Ideas such as

privatization and globalization suggest dramatic changes for academic institutions. What do these changes imply for academic work and leadership?

The culture of colleges and universities has traditionally been defined partly by the concept of the 'ivory tower.' In their search for 'truthful' knowledge, academics must be removed from society; their research should not be swayed by the larger populace. The assumption has been that active engagement with the external environment will pollute the atmosphere of the academic and in doing so jeopardize the production of knowledge. The result is that the culture of an academic organization is generally inward-looking and monastic. Rewards and sanctions, the evaluation framework (tenure and promotion), and a host of honors, prizes, and promotions—all are based on the judgment of one's colleagues rather than by individuals in the larger environment. Whether a professor gains tenure, how large a salary raise occurs, and the like occur based on the judgment of one's peers. Whether an individual's work is of worth to individuals outside the academy is largely irrelevant. An academic receives more rewards for writing an article that will be refereed by his/her peers and appear in a journal read by a thousand other like-minded academics than for writing a thought-provoking article in a newspaper or magazine that may be seen by 100,000 readers. Again, the assumption is that those thousand academics are more important or more relevant for the academic, than the larger citizenry.

The point, of course, is not to overdraw the distinction. Academics have made any number of findings and breakthroughs in multiple areas that have benefited society. However, the culture of the organization has been one that has assumed that an arm's distance from society is not only beneficial, but necessary. As a consequence, the academic leader is an individual who is engaged with his or her peers, not with the general citizenry.

The future, however, will require the opposite of colleges and universities. Those who will be seen as academic leaders in postsecondary organizations will be individuals who are actively engaged with multiple constituencies in the external environment. To be sure, peer review and the judgment of one's colleagues will remain important, but the stance of the postsecondary organization must change, if colleges and universities are to remain viable entities in the 21st century. Rather than a managerial fix that seeks to reform this or that part of an organization, fundamental cultural changes are required for colleges and universities to be seen as responsive and engaged with their larger communities (Tierney, 1998, 1999). Leadership will not mean merely that one's peers respect the individual's work, but that those in society will work with and learn from academics.

Leadership, then, will involve translation. The academic will not only need to know the rarefied language of the ivory tower, but also be able to speak and listen to individuals

who have an interest in, and may be impacted by, the work of the academic. The 20th century, for example, was a time when a firewall was built between K-12 education and postsecondary education. When academics deigned to speak with K-12 educators, the stance could most often be described as distant and frequently disdainful. The 21st century will require the opposite to take place. The firewall will be replaced by much closer working relationships built on trust and collaboration (Tierney, in press). Obviously, such a portrait envisages significant cultural changes. How individuals become socialized in this new culture will also change. And yet, the values of the academy—academic freedom, the unfettered search for truth—will continue to be at the center of the academic culture. The leader’s task, then, is to maintain and enhance those core values while adapting to the changing circumstances of the 21st century in a manner that makes the organization’s borders more permeable, and the organization’s actors more open to engagement and translational work.

* The author acknowledges the thoughtful feedback of Stu Gothold and Karri Holley.

References

- Chaffee, Ellen & Tierney, William G. (1988). *Collegiate culture and leadership strategies*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Tierney, William G. (1988). *Organizational culture in higher education: Defining the essentials*. *Journal of Higher Education*, 59(1), 2-21.
- Tierney, William G. (Ed.). (1991). *Culture and ideology in higher education: Advancing a critical agenda*. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers.
- Tierney, William G. (Ed.). (1998). *The responsive university: Restructuring for high performance*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tierney, William G. (1999). *Building the responsive campus: Creating high performance colleges and universities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tierney, William G. (in press). *Trust and the public good: Examining the cultural conditions of academic work*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishers.

William G. Tierney is the Wilbur Kieffer Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, USA.