

University of Massachusetts Boston: Reconstituting a Continuing Education Division to a Degree- Granting Academic Unit

Philip DiSalvio

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

Unless structure follows strategy, inefficiency results.

—Alfred Chandler

ABSTRACT: This case study describes the leadership challenges and strategic opportunities associated with the reconstitution of a continuing education unit into a degree-granting academic unit. Lessons learned and recommendations are offered to institutional leaders considering a similar reorganizational strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The ground has shifted in fundamental ways in higher education, and it is becoming increasingly evident that strategic structural reorganization will play an important role in the financial survival of many institutions. Just as the hospital industry transformed its organizational structures in the 1980s as a result of changes in funding, a similar paradigm shift is occurring in higher education.

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Consider the relationship between strategy (i.e., actions that achieve organizational goals) and structure (i.e., organizational design). In traditional higher education, strategy follows structure. Institutions typically work within a highly formalized silo structure, take inventory of their available resources, and subsequently introduce new learning offerings based on the availability of resources within the confines of a discipline-based academic organizational structure.

Understanding the close links among strategy, structure, and the environment, it makes sense that organizational structure should expand options rather than constrain the strategic choices institutions can make. In a harsh higher education environment posed by funding shortfalls and fierce competition, higher education institutions must be optimally structured to meet those challenges. Accordingly, the principle of structure following strategy may be more fitting in the current higher education environment.

Given that organizational structure influences efficiency, effectiveness, and market agility, many higher education institutions are ripe for academic units to look closely at their organizational structure and to ask whether their structure is aligned with the capability to maintain a competitive edge, capture niche markets, and leverage internal strengths.

What organizational structures best optimize an institution's strengths? What college structures best sharpen the strategic focus of the institution and position it to take advantage of future opportunities and gain competitive advantage?

These questions are particularly relevant in a time where public institutions are receiving less state funding and private independents are looking for ways to bolster their bottom lines.

This case study describes a "structure following strategy" approach—i.e., the reconstitution of a continuing education division into a degree-granting academic unit (i.e., a college) and provides an analysis of the implications of such a reorganization strategy.

The insights and ideas drawn from the structural organizational change—from a division to a college—and an account of the ongoing challenges, opportunities, and effects of such a strategy may be helpful to higher education leaders considering a similar reorganization strategy.

MAKING THE CASE FOR STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The traditional higher education organizational structure—one with vertical discipline-based silos controlling the means of degree production—is a feature common to many American institutions. Silos facilitate discipline-based scholarship and research. But rigid silos inhibit collaboration and cooperation by reinforcing insularity, as each college pursues its own agenda. And when each silo requires its own arrangement of systems and services, excessive duplication of processes, procedures, services, and overlapping programs leads to wasted resources. This inefficiency leads to institutions sub-optimizing their resources and their financial flexibility.

Some who advocate organizational realignment in higher education argue that the traditional discipline-based silo structure constrains the institution's ability to adapt to the harsh realities of higher education today.¹ It can be further advanced that in the current environment, an academic unit that has control over the means of degree production and market agility is better positioned.

Indeed, the flexibility to expand strategic programming choices and the capacity to fund high-risk, high-potential programming—working in delivery modalities and formats attuned to the non-traditional learner—provides the institution with a competitive edge.

Breaking down bureaucratic discipline-based vertical silos could result in an interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary curriculum that broaden the institution's market reach and help the institution adapt to new economic realities.²

To do this, a structural realignment may be necessary. The reconstitution of a continuing education division to a degree-granting unit is one such realignment, as the experience of the University of Massachusetts Boston illustrates.

FROM DIVISION TO COLLEGE

The evolution of the University of Massachusetts Boston Division of Continuing, Corporate and Distance Education (CCDE) into a degree-granting college required a seven-year process that began in 2003 with the endorsement of the provost:

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|----------------|--|
| December 2003 | Provost forms task force to explore viability of establishing a new college incorporating CCDE |
| October 2005 | Task force recommends formation of new college incorporating CCDE operations |
| March 2010 | New provost forwards recommendation to Faculty Council Academic Affairs Committee and Budget/Long-Range Planning Committee |
| April 2010 | Faculty Council approves establishment of University College |
| May 2010 | Committee on Academic and Student Affairs of the Board of Trustees endorses recommendation |
| June 2010 | Board of Trustees approves establishment of University College |
| September 2010 | UMass Boston community receives news of University College |
| August 2011 | Founding Dean of University College appointed |
| June 2012 | First University College degrees conferred |

Table 1. Historical timeline: From a division to a college.

In order for the proposal to make its way up the ladder of campus governing boards, it was necessary to make a clear case for structural realignment because the realignment would cut across traditional power structures. Specifically, it was crucial to address concerns related to program redundancy, “poaching,” and academic quality. Thus, the rationale provided throughout the process spoke primarily to aspects of institutional enhancement, a re-division of responsibilities, and a staking out of territory.³ Table 2 displays this in matrix form.

| Institutional Enhancement | Division of Responsibilities | Territorial Claims |
|--|--|---|
| Enhance and diversify the university’s academic offerings | Pilot new learning technologies and innovations | Interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary programs |
| Respond quickly to work-force development needs | Incubate new high-risk, high-demand academic programs | Areas of study other colleges are unable or unwilling to develop |
| Increase the supply of offerings to match the need | Develop programs with a demonstrated need | College-specific niches that otherwise might not be adopted by current discipline-based silos |
| Expand strategic programming choices, especially in high-risk, high-potential programs | Provide accelerated modes of delivery and program formats for non-traditional learners | New areas of need that existing colleges are unlikely to fill |
| Expand capacity for scholarly contribution and external research-funding support | Develop interdisciplinary programs and courses | Lifelong learning, non-credit programs, professional development |

Table 2. Making the case for organizational change.

Following the initial approval of the intended reconstitution, a number of transition activities occurred over a period of 14 months that included leadership changes, institutionalization of governance processes, and business plan development.

FROM ENTREPRENEURISM TO ACADEME

The evolution of the Division of Continuing, Corporate and Distance Education as an entrepreneurial revenue generator to an academic unit with a core entrepreneurial component was not regarded as inevitable or natural. Although the division had a record of developing successful non-credit continuing education and professional development programs and supporting college partners in creating credit-bearing offerings, it needed to mitigate concerns by imposing limits on growth and adding layers of cross-campus governance to the proposal. Even after its establishment as the only continuing education unit designated as a college in the UMass system, University College (UC) had to address a number of misconceptions. Some expected a zero-sum result with enrollment being diverted away from various discipline-based colleges to University College. Others anticipated that the unit's new power to create its own degree and credit-bearing certificate programs would create intra-campus competition for students.

The inherent baggage that came in transitioning from the divisional campus entrepreneurial revenue generator to an academic unit with a core entrepreneurial component created a number of leadership organizational challenges.

Managing the challenges

Confronting the multi-faceted and wide-ranging organization leadership challenges of a newly launched academic entity was essential. Five areas of need were identified that required strategic action to move the new college forward. The areas of need and strategic actions are shown in Table 3:

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| Internal Strategic Communications | Effective Long-term Internal Processes | Change Management | Financial Obstacles | External Strategic Communications |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| Align UC with other colleges | Incentivize inter-college collaboration | Change internal UC culture | Deal with pressures of moving to tuition parity | Establish clear external brand image |
| Diminish fear of “poaching” | Establish transparent process for developing programs | Maintain role as entrepreneurial and revenue generator | Manage operational differences (registration, admissions, etc.) | Carve out competitive advantages through image as a college |
| Diminish fear of lessened academic quality | Support faculty with resources and encourage involvement | Create culture of transparency between UC and other colleges | Defend academic calendar and other variations attributed to CCDE | Leverage status as a college |
| Articulate strategic role of UC | Develop customer relations management system | Stake out areas of academic interest | Institute strategy for development, fundraising, and advancement | |
| Realign perception of UC and overcome misconceptions | Development strategy for promoting online program growth | Establish UC as interdisciplinary linchpin | | |
| Create culture of transparency between UC and other colleges | | Position UC within academic-research-learning community | | |

Table 3. Leadership challenges.

Leveraging the opportunities

Closely linked with the strategic rationale for the organization realignment were a number of identifiable opportunities. Coming as a result of the structural change, these opportunities were seen as helping the institution adapt to the convergence of forces driving change in higher education today. These are articulated in Table 4:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Market Agility | Accelerate to-the-market offerings, especially in formats for non-traditional learners (e.g., accelerated time to completion, career focus, online delivery), with ability to grant undergraduate and graduate degrees and for-credit certificates |
| Autonomy | Retain unit's processes and structures for course and curriculum approval and degree requirements as those of an entrepreneurial entity but adapt to best features of other colleges |
| Strategic Options | Serve as incubator by funding high-risk, high-potential market-driven initiatives |
| Streamlined Processes | Increase unit's ability to move quickly in areas of curricular change, faculty hiring, and staff efficiency |
| Identity Clarification | Establish meaningful image as a college with clear purpose and mission (rather than division) within campus and UMass context |
| Name Recognition | Emphasize status as equal partner to other on-campus colleges to current and potential students, parents, and faculty |
| Academic and Research Credibility | Expand capacity for scholarly contribution and external research funding as equal member of university learning community |
| Development, Fundraising, Advancement | Build endowment fund and generate non-tuition income by outreach to alumni and prospective donors |

Table 4. Strategic opportunities.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

This case study presents one institution's experience in remaking a continuing education division as a degree-granting academic unit in order to sharpen the institution's strategic focus, align it with market trends, and meet the pressures of a changing competitive environment. The process is ongoing, but we have learned some things that can be passed on to other institutions considering such a major change. Four major "lesson areas" have emerged. Each of these lesson areas suggests specific actions that might contribute to the success of such an endeavor. They include:

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| | |
|---|---|
| Overcome the Trauma of Birth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Draw up and refine active and ongoing internal strategic communication plan - Realign perceptions - Change internal brand from division to college - Articulate strategic role of new college - Secure active support from highest levels |
| Move Forward as a Partner | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintain win-win mindset - Strive for transparency and clarity - Incentivize inter-college partnerships - Incentivize chair and faculty for program development - Build relationship with deans - Respect college chain of command |
| Establish the College as an Academic Unit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change internal culture - Clarify strategic priorities - Support faculty for program expansion - Create academic streams of activity - Seek college-specific niches - Span silos by developing interdisciplinary programs |
| Build and External Identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Draw up and refine active and ongoing external strategic communication plan - Realign perceptions - Change internal brand from division to college - Articulate strategic role of new college - Secure active support from highest levels |

Table 5. Lessons from the field.

Hovering over these four lesson areas is a reality that drives the challenges and defines the opportunities, i.e., the displacement of the status quo. A new academic unit inevitably presents a perceived threat to the existing discipline-based silos that control the means of production. Cutting across the existing power structures where entrenched interests exist requires a commitment to a well thought out cause and effect analysis and an attention to the leadership challenges and strategic opportunities accompanying such an organizational realignment.

POST-REALIGNMENT

Prior to the reconstitution of the Division of Continuing, Corporate and Distance Education (CCDE), all credit-bearing offerings were conferred through the seven colleges of the University of Massachusetts Boston. Its new status as a college afforded University College the right to confer its own credit-bearing offerings as the eighth college.

Two programs were launched exclusively through University College in academic year 2010-2011: an online M.Ed. in Instructional Design and an online graduate certificate in Instructional Technology Design. Eighteen months subsequent to launch, 126 students were actively enrolled in the

instructional design program and 30 students were actively enrolled in instructional technology design. In June 2012, University College conferred an M.Ed. in Instructional Design to 27 students.

In the 2011-2012 academic year, two programs were launched exclusively through University College: an online graduate certificate in global post-disaster studies and a non-credit professional development certificate program in global post-disaster reconstruction and management. Twelve months subsequent to launch, 12 students were actively enrolled in the global post-disaster studies graduate certificate courses and 5 students were actively enrolled in the global post-disaster reconstruction and management professional development program.

An undergraduate degree completion program and two graduate certificate programs offered exclusively through University College are planned for launch in academic year 2012-2013. An undergraduate degree completion program, two graduate degree programs, and three graduate certificate programs developed with campus partners are also planned for launch in academic year 2012-2013.


CONCLUSION

Although the realignment is a work in progress, early indications suggest encouraging attitudinal changes on the part of deans to collaborate and explore new program partnerships with University College and escalating faculty interest in developing new programs. Coincidentally, online enrollment figures indicate an on-average increase of approximately 10 percent over the previous year.

A number of factors may have contributed to shifting behaviors. As the institutional unit that administers online learning, University College drove the effort to institutionalize an incentive revenue-sharing arrangement for intercollegiate collaboration on online programs. This appears to have resulted in increased levels of interest in partnering with University College. Likewise, many faculty members have begun to see program partnership development with the new college as a “win-win” proposition since revenue sharing flows down through colleges to departments.

Bearing heavily on this is the leverage that comes with University College’s recent empowerment to confer academic credit. Strong motivation for innovation and new program growth that did not otherwise exist among the colleges prior to University College may now exist with the assumption that “if we don’t do it, University College will.”

While these incentives could be an important factor in early attitudinal change, the messages conveyed through an aggressive high-visibility identity-building communication strategy and through the symbolic academic trappings and ceremonies at milestone events where campus colleges are represented (e.g., commencement, convocations, etc.) might also be contributing factors in shaping attitudes early on.

The decade-long transition from division to college required trust and compromise at all levels, and that same spirit will continue to guide University College as it shapes its role as a vital and permanent campus fixture of the University of Massachusetts. 

ENDNOTES

1. In a report published by *The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education* titled “Organize to optimize: Organizational change and higher education,” the authors make a solid case for breaking down the vertical discipline-based silos.
2. Allen F. Repko offers insightful comments on the value of interdisciplinary approaches in higher education work in his book, *Interdisciplinary research: Process and theory*.
3. The strategic rationale to which this refers is condensed based on the original proposal document.

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