

Decision-making in multi-campus higher education institutions

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The author investigated decision-making in multi-campus higher education environments via separate interviews with eight professionals asked to describe relevant experiences. The results point to leadership, participation, autonomy/centralization and structure as important factors in understanding decision-making in such environments. Evidence indicates that autonomy and centralization are often opposing forces, and organizational success may be enhanced by balancing them through the effective use of participation.

Introduction

The author took a qualitative approach to investigating the topic of decision-making in multi-campus higher education institutions. He asked an essential question of the eight interviewees: What have you experienced around decision-making in multi-campus institutions? The question is relevant because a number of such institutions currently exist and multi-campus organizations will become more common as institutions merge to gain efficiency made possible by new technologies.

Background Concepts

Decision-making

Many theorists attempt to understand the mechanics of individual decisions or evaluate their effectiveness as single discrete determinations. Garvin and Roberto (2001) recognize decisions as processes occurring over time and across cultures. Not only

should one resist viewing decisions as single events, it is also helpful to distinguish between strategic decision-making and operational decision-making. Strategic decision-making defines purpose and operational decision-making implements purpose (Simon 1976).

Rausch, Halfhill, Sherman, and Washbush (2001), noting several elements to be considered during decision-making processes, emphasize the use of appropriate participation. They also claim that as society moves further from the industrial era competence is less likely to depend on functional competence and more likely to depend on relationship skills (Rausch et al., 2001). Morgan (2003), Wheatley (2003) and Schein (1992) point out that organizational success is more dependent now on relationship skills than it has been in the past.

Womack and Podemski (1985) have reviewed state supported multi-campus systems and outline the importance of equal participation in planning processes from each campus in a multi-campus system. They further state that each campus in a system should base mission and goals, at least to some degree, on the needs of the individual communities served. Finally, they recommended that different campuses excel in ways that fit their particular environments. Vroom (2000) writes:

Under a wide range of conditions, increasing participation leads to greater 'buy-in,' commitment to decisions, and mo-

tivation to implement them effectively (p. 85).

While there is broad support for participation in decision-making, there are also perceived problems including reduced decision-making speed (Daft & Marcic, 2001) and the dangers of groupthink (Janis, 1972). Eisenhardt (1999), on the other hand, believes a cohesive group with the ability to consider multiple viewpoints and the ability to resolve conflict has the potential to develop group intuition. She posits such intuition as an element in successful leadership teams, one which may allow a group to move through decision-making processes more quickly.

Structure including alignment

Decision-making significantly influences organizational structure. A highly differentiated organization is likely to be more controlling and hierarchical and often less innovative (Dougherty, 2001). A highly integrated organization is likely to respond more quickly, be innovative and yet may have problems with control (Dougherty, 2001). Nadler and Tushman (1999) describe the ideal in organizational design as the capacity to seek both integration and differentiation with the ability to link units across functions in the organization.

Leadership

Leadership emerged as a common factor in the interviewees' experience. Eisenhardt (1999) writes

that traditional models and understanding of decision-making place too much confidence in the ability of executives to analyze an organization and its environment. She also states that strategic decision-making should not be isolated at the top of an organization. Distributing strategic decision-making allows people at all levels to make appropriate decisions aligned with one another (Worley, Hitchin & Ross, 1996).

Clearly, leaders are instrumental in maintaining or changing the cultures of their organizations (Schein, 1992 and Massarik and Pei-Carpenter, 2002). In the end, situational leadership becomes a prerequisite of an effective leader (Rowe & Mason, 1987 and Schein, 1992), because a good leader will adapt his or her style to the situation or person at hand, regardless—or in spite of—style preference (Rowe & Mason, 1987).

Key leadership components that emerge in a literature review include the following: 1) the importance of relationship building skills (Wheatley, 2003; Morgan, 2003; and Schein, 1992), 2) the ability to manage participatory decision-making and its relational aspects (Womack & Podemski, 1985; Eishenhardt, 1999; and Schein, 1992), and 3) the ability to manage paradoxes (Smith & Berg, 1987) or polarities (Johnson, 1992). The later point became important in the research as participants discussed the damage done by ongoing, unresolved conflict between those who sought autonomy in a

multi-campus system and those who sought centralization.

Methodology

The following eight persons gave interviews:

1. a former vice president of academic and student services at a multi-campus for-profit institution
2. a director of financial aid, who has worked at two private multi-campus institutions
3. a department chair of one program at one campus of a private multi-campus higher education institution
4. the interim chancellor of a state supported multi-campus community college system
5. a retired counselor and former financial aid director of one campus within a state supported multi-campus technical college system
6. an organization development expert and adjunct faculty member at a multi-campus institution
7. a consultant who has worked extensively with two year colleges, including multi-campus colleges within a state system
8. an associate dean at a non-profit and private multi-campus institution.

The interviews were conducted and transcribed between April 2003 and November 2003. The researcher followed a protocol based

on recommendations outlined in the writings of van Kaam (1966), Moustakas (1994) and Hycner (1985). Individual summary descriptions sent to each person were either edited or approved without changes. The researcher then revised each summary to reflect any changes. The interviews focused on two primary questions: What have you experienced around decision-making while working at x? How would you design a multi-campus system?

Results

The researcher identified sixteen themes in the meaning unit analysis. The current research looks at three theme categories: 1) leadership (cited 144 times), 2) autonomy, centralization, and structure (cited 267 times) and 3) decision-making including participation in decision-making (cited 18 times).

Leadership

One participant, describing the leaders in his organization, observed that mean spirited people, especially in positions of power, can control an organization's culture, and did so in the institution he described. Other participants made statements similar to the following:

- We never finished anything.
- Our problem came with leadership.
- The president didn't understand multi-campus institutions.

- There was no good model for multi-campus institutions being used.
- Leaders issued orders, they were arbitrary, they did not have appropriate experiences.
- Leaders should focus on student learning.

One participant described a lack of direction exacerbated by unclear communication. She described her position as lacking authority because the senior leadership did not want to share authority. She described those leaders as people unable to agree with one another, unable to consider alternate viewpoints and unwilling to change.

Structure/autonomy/centralization

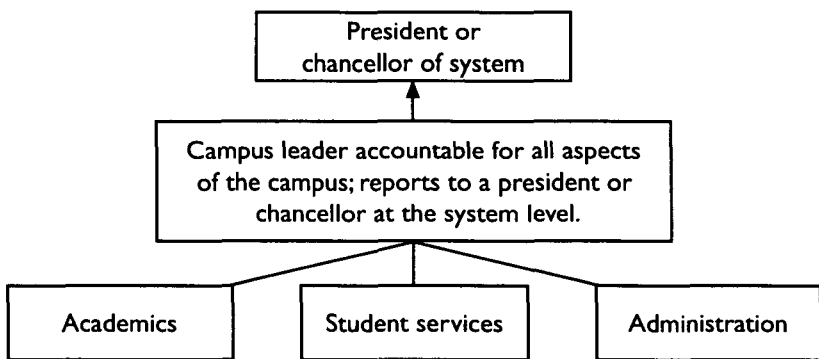
Alignment problems surfaced in relation to integration efforts, and the problems negatively influenced perceptions of leader effectiveness. Alignment problems during integration include difficulty during transitions, not knowing colleagues at other campuses, frustration, loss of identity, people hanging on to old roles and behaviors, rushing integration processes, and concomitant feelings of disconnection. In addition, interviewees questioned the financial savings assumed by many integrative processes.

There were a number of problems associated with extreme autonomy remembered at one school. For example, an interviewee spoke of different tuition structures on different campuses, students having difficulty transferring between

campuses or even taking courses at other campuses and campus leaders building little empires inadequately aligned with other campuses. Positive attributes of autonomy included faster decision-making at the local level, a more comfortable work environment, more frequent opportunities to participate in discussing problems and directions, and greater responsiveness to local communities.

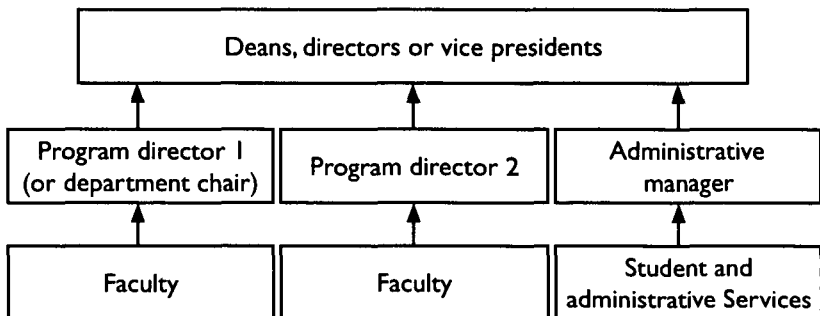
Two organizational structure types dominated structural design discussions, types based on whether autonomy or centralization was more highly regarded by those in leadership positions. An organization structure promoting autonomy for a campus, (with a traditional sort of structure) typically looked something like Figure 1:

Figure 1. Campus autonomy organizational structure



Campuses that were structured to facilitate centralized decision-making had a structure like that portrayed in Figure 2. The more centralized structure integrates the siloed functions at a higher level in the organization than it would in a decentralized organization. If one visualizes the vertical sections extending upwardly and downwardly, the resulting silos become evident.

Figure 2. Centralized decision-making organizational structure



Benefits of centralization include: improved efficiency, limited duplication of services, increased access and transfer opportunities, and less opportunity for misuse of institutional resources at the local level. Problems of centralization include slower decision-making, employees at the center being too far removed from important stakeholders, difficulty in maintaining relations between the center and the campuses, increased red tape, and problem-resolution taking longer. One participant noted that with greater autonomy there was a "clear chain of command" and decision makers were accessible.

Decision-making

The chancellor's mantra of "buy-in" best championed participation as a pivotal key to success in multi-campus administration. One person suggested that participation is important as a free-standing value, while others, who mentioned participation, noted its relevance in improving alignment, integration and ultimately success. One participant stressed the importance of genuinely seeking consensus while recognizing consensus is rarely possible. Another interviewee described decision-making as growing more cumbersome, slower, and less aligned with reality (at the local level) as it became more centralized; the degraded process was accompanied by deterioration in relationships within the system, according to that participant.

Discussion

The following two problems emerged as typical and the following four propositions are posited as helpful in addressing the associated problem.

Problem one: forces supporting autonomy and forces supporting centralization tend to be poorly managed. Recommendation one: have a leader at the campus level who is accountable for all aspects of that campus and responsible for aligning it internally and externally. Such a leader will insure that operational decisions are made on campus for all aspects of the enterprise. Recommendation two: strategic planning opportunities should exist at the local level with feedback loops connecting that level with other campuses and the system office. Recommendation three: manage the dilemma created by those seeking autonomy and those seeking centralization by continually identifying and seeking the benefits of both.

Problem two: leadership qualities and priorities are a confounding factor in multi-campus organizational success. Recommendation four: provide ample opportunities for supporting relationship development and participation to insure the alignment of mission and goals with employee behavior. Lack of interpersonal support undermines the mission. Consequently, campus and system level leaders must be adept at managing relationships and participation processes.

Alignment, as it relates to pressure toward either autonomy or centralization, is likely to be a particular problem in a multi-campus institution. Efforts to resist the center and achieve greater autonomy can be most aggressive at the campus level. If the values, goals, and behavior of central leadership are not aligned with the leaders at the campus level, problems will arise. Leaders effect alignment when they correlate their expressed values with their behavior, generate a vision, and involve the entire organization in goal setting and feedback.

Multi-campus managers must maximize the quality of both operational and strategic decision-making. Managing operational decision-making requires attention to timely service and timely decisions, while maximizing strategic decision-making requires planning processes which create buy-in. Within these parameters one can determine what to centralize and what to decentralize. For instance, payroll and human resource functions can be centralized to the degree it is possible to give timely responses to questions emanating from the campuses. Certain maintenance functions might be centralized if campuses are close together. Operational decisions in both academic and student service areas should be made locally as much as possible. As Tichy (2002) wrote, "In the time it takes for a question to be passed up the ladder and a decision handed back down, the customer will have gone somewhere else or the opportunity will

be missed" (p. 21). Strategic decision-makers should seek buy-in as widely as possible by promoting broad-based participation.

The researcher saw a tendency toward either an exaggerated commitment to autonomy or to centralization. Johnson (1992) suggests that, rather than choosing one extreme over another, the more appropriate response strategy recognizes and values both poles of the dilemma. Leaders should value both and work with people to achieve adequate and flexible levels of both. One interviewee stated that supporting autonomy within an organization is not easy for many leaders because it fosters a disturbing sense that he or she is not in control.

Leadership, when focused on relationships and alignment, can make either a more centralized or a more autonomous approach work. Despite this dichotomy, the author believes that greater autonomy for the academic side of the institution at the campus level can result in more effective synergies between academic departments as well as with local community forces, thus leading to a well-managed, stronger institution.

Leaders tend to take short cuts around two principles repeated throughout the interviews: 1) involving others in planning and 2) moving operational decisions to the point of origin. Such shortcuts often result in processes which lack integrity, promises which are not kept, or simply an abandonment of stated goals.

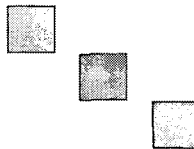
Summary

As a result of the research, the author confirms the hypothesis that multi-campus institutions commonly deal with tensions arising from the polarized desire for autonomy at the local level and greater control at the center of the organization. Leadership must manage the dilemma effectively in order to succeed. Leaders should establish participatory processes within the institution that provide employees with opportunities to make operational decisions locally as well as participate meaningfully in institutional strategic decision-making processes.

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