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Briefing Notes:

Use of Histories of the Future in Facilitating the Transition to College

Introduction

Higher education is facing enormous changes, yet its mechanisms for experimenting and managing change are woefully underdeveloped (Gilmore, Hirshhorn and Kelly, 1999). Technology has and will continue to change the way universities educate their students. Societal change has altered the perception and expectations of higher education; classrooms are no longer static, with a professor delivering information to quietly respectful students. Interaction is the new paradigm, placing greater demands on both students and professors alike.

The increasing cost of higher education also has had an impact on expectations. Students and parents are looking to gain a competitive advantage from their university degree. After all, they will need gainful employment to pay off tens of thousands of dollars in educational loans accrued during four years of college. Like health care before it, higher education now finds itself having to listen to and respond to market forces, yet it also needs to balance being “customer driven” (Day, 1998) with honoring its historic educational and research missions.

This document presents a case study of how one major state university set out to redesign a college-orientation program for incoming freshmen. It illustrates the use of a “campaign” approach for working through change in settings with widely distributed power—what organizational theorists (Orton and Weick, 1990) call “loosely coupled.” One key tenet of a campaign approach is acting one’s way to new thinking rather than thinking one’s way to new actions. Especially in higher education settings where the skill in rhetoric and debate is so great, it can become a defense against change, as the many voices stalemate one another. The method herein also illustrates a double use of a powerful planning and change technique called “History of the Future.” This technique was used by the team charged with redesigning orientation to explore the transition from high school to university.

The Presenting Challenge

Prior to the summer of 1997, the University had surveyed incoming freshmen in the spirit of greater “customer orientation,” asking them to list the two most prominent expectations they had upon entering the University. The surveyed students frequently remarked that they expected the new experience to be somehow different from their high school experience. They also noted that they were unsure how it would be different and that they did not know how to prepare for it.

No one was more concerned about the student surveys than the provost, who posed a number of questions to a team of top leaders charged with redesigning orientation:

- How could the University better communicate with its incoming students?
- What are its expectations for student learning in the freshman year?
- What does it mean to be a research institution committed to teaching and learning?
- What does the University need to do to affirm explicitly and deliberately that being serious about learning is a fundamental institutional value?
- What are the learning objectives for freshmen?
- What skills should be developed?
- What is the role of research and teaching in a culture that takes learning seriously?

The provost turned to the University community for help in restructuring the orientation, creating a team that took this issue to a program sponsored by the Institute for Higher Education Research and the Wharton School. Their charge was to improve the orientation program and the communication mechanisms that tell incoming freshmen what will be expected of them and how they can make the transition from high school to university.

At this session—a mini retreat interspersed with sessions on different aspects about the challenge of leadership in higher education—the team discussed this issue. Toward the end of the four-day session, the team was introduced to some of the key guiding ideas in the campaign approach to change. The campaign approach to change is contrasted with a traditional planning process in the following chart.

The Planning Process	The Campaign
Define goals	Develop a strategic theme that mobilizes people
Goals are definite and explicit—perhaps before people know enough to know what they want	Theme invites interpretation and discovery
Energy goes into the document	Energy goes into actions—pilots, probes, projects, events
Hard to implement; words seem fine but no commitment	Implementing is the only way to embody the strategy
Formal task forces, usual suspects	Coalitions, grassroots, new blood
Inclusion based on representation	Inclusion based on passion and interest
Reports, memos	Press releases
Easy to block; debate it to death	Can move forward without agreement of all
Think your way into new acting	Act your way into new thinking

In taking up this question, they had to rethink the first-year experience and to think more broadly about the University's commitment to research, teaching and learning excellence. It allowed deliberate steps to be taken to create an environment that encourages these values. In the frame of the campaign approach, often beginning with a focused, concrete area of action such as orientation, one encounters within this transition many of the broader themes facing the University.

In the spirit of a campaign, the team began thinking of how orientation could enact the emerging theme of taking learning seriously and how key stakeholders could be swept into doing something about this rather than just being part of a study process.

As a capstone to help teams think about what they were going to do when they returned to their campuses, we used the "History of the Future" process at the IRHE seminar. In the process, teams were challenged to imagine that they had been back at their respective universities for six months and to describe what had happened in the past tense.

"History of the Future" is a technique that the Center for Applied Research (Gilmore and Shea, 1997) evolved out of work done by K. Weick (1979) on how people think about the future. The research suggested that people develop more vivid, interwoven stories when asked to think about a situation in the past tense than when asked to think about the same situation in the future tense. It was easier for participants to think creatively and concretely, linking political and technical events into a narrative structure, when they worked backward in writing a development history than when they worked forward in writing a development plan for the future.

This technique of constructing histories of the future is a useful antidote to the rational/analytical paradigm so prevalent in planning and management. Vivid histories of the future enable people to construct rich narratives; look at imagined actions, mistakes, successes, moves and players; and then step back and connect their current choices with the more complex, imagined experiences.

The Intervention

The process of using histories of the future struck the team as a method that could be used for incoming freshmen to get them to think concretely about their freshman year. In addition, as faculty members were identified as major stakeholders, the team realized the potential power in joining faculty and students in this process. Professors could write personal accounts of their freshman years and use this as a point of connection with incoming freshmen to get them to think about their own ideal first-year experience. Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) has written on “threshold shock”—the moment when we are in transition, looking back and looking ahead. By getting faculty to look back, it also encouraged the students as they faced their transition to reflect on their high-school-to-university transition, especially as the assignment was constructed.

History of the Future Assignment for Incoming Freshmen

The new orientation process was developed with the following elements:

- The process of examining the first-year experience university-wide had led faculty to think back on their own experiences; the provost asked faculty to write about them and compiled them into a packet. These essays were sent out to incoming students. Students were therefore familiar with the challenges the professors faced and may have felt less intimidated knowing that their professors faced the same challenges they did.
- Students were asked to think about what they expected from their first year before they arrived for a one-week orientation session in the summer before their first year.
- Students partook in an innovative exercise called “History of the Future,” described below.

One of the main problems students faced was uncertainty about what to expect from their first year. The provost hoped to help students think about these expectations by getting students thinking about what the first year of college might be like. Students were asked to think about their experience in the past tense, as though the first year had ended.

At orientation this year, the freshmen completed a “History of the Future” exercise on their expectations for the first year. The assignment was worded as follows:

Your first writing assignment as a college student is to write a Future History. Picture yourself in the following scene: you have just completed your first year here. You are all packed and have half an hour left before you are due to leave campus. You decide to use the time to answer a letter you have just received from a high school friend who told you about her first year at another university. Using this piece of paper, draft a letter in which you tell her about your first year here.

As you write, you might keep these kinds of questions in mind: what do you think this next year will be like? What are your expectations for it? What experiences do you think you will have? What will you do? Where? With whom? What do you hope to accomplish?

The process was useful in its own right. Freshmen were not passively oriented but rather engaged in an innovative, creative, playful dialog both with their peers and with faculty members. Ellen Langer (1997) has written about the link of mindfulness to learning. The earlier data from the survey had suggested that freshmen were unsure how it would be different. Rather than model an asymmetric process in which the University tried to tell freshmen what would be expected of them, they enacted a rich dialogue that would begin to engage students in collaboratively defining what would be the nature of their experience. The assignment asked students to begin building a bridge between their two worlds—home and university—by asking them to write about their desired university experience while still in their home environment.

In addition to the value in getting freshmen to reflect forward on their upcoming year, the planning group realized that the essays as a set would illuminate patterns in the hopes, fears and interests of the incoming class. Therefore, as befits a university, they performed content analysis on the essays. Themes from 1756 incoming students were recorded. The top four expectations were as follows:

1. *To meet and build relationships with new people*, mentioned by 549 students.

Comments included expectations to “meet many new people” and “make new friends.” In 49 of the comments students looked forward to making friends with people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. They wanted “to gain new viewpoints,” “to learn to relate to people different from me” and “socioeconomic diversity.” 101 items noted an interest in becoming involved in athletics, in participating in intramural sports and in watching and supporting University teams (“cheer on our teams,” “Go White Go Green!”). 72 comments indicated an interest on the students’ part to become involved in campus activities, clubs and organizations; 68 of those referred to specific clubs such as “work on the literary magazine” and “join the Motion Team.”

2. *To grow and develop personally*, mentioned by 396 students.

Most of the comments indicated the importance of managing time well, such as “organize,” “prioritize,” “control free time.” Students had taken the resource guide on planners to heart, as reflected in comments such as “learn to use a planner” and “get and USE a planner.” Some students wanted to “grow as a person,” “get cultured” and “keep an open mind.” Twenty students revealed that they viewed the freshman year as a time of “freedom from parents” and the opportunity “to get to live independently.” Another 25 expressed anxiety about leaving familiar homes and loved ones, as revealed by comments such as “hard-core homesickness,” “being alone, scared” and “missing people/pets.”

3. *To work in order to succeed and flourish academically*, noted by 309 students.

Students revealed they planned to achieve “a high GPA,” “to get at least a 3.9,” “to get all A’s” and “pass my classes.” Another 41 students looked forward to their academic experience in terms other than grade-point averages, with comments including “expand educational horizons,” “higher level of intellectualism,” “learn as much as possible” and “improve myself mentally.” Thirty-six items mentioned faculty relationships, such as “getting to know professors” and “quality relationships with faculty.” Twenty-eight students expressed a desire to study abroad, 33 intended to improve their study skills, and 11 recorded students’ anxiety about the difficulty of academic work (“dealing with a hard class,” “larger class sizes”).

4. *Learn how to manage the business of day-to-day living*, noted by 297 respondents.

Students indicated their belief that being in college will require them to be more responsible and independent than they have been in the past. Fifty items focused on their need to relate to roommates (“try to get along with roommate,” “living in a small place with another person,” “roommate problems”), others were concerned with sharing space communally with a large group (“sharing bathrooms,” “learning to live with other people”). Sixty-five students were concerned with finding part-time jobs and managing their personal finances, with comments such as “to have a job or not,” “keep a steady job” and “keep track of expenses.”

In Conclusion

What is significant about this case is the risk that the team took to enact key values of the University in redesigning the orientation program. Instead of the University telling the students, they created a process by which the students could creatively “tell” the University about their expectations. This does not enact the customer model in which people express needs and the university fills them. Rather, the partnership aspect is enacted with faculty leading by making available their experience and inviting students to join them.

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