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ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT
AND CHANGE IN UNIVERSITIES

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The Center for Organizational Development and Leadership at Rutgers University: A Case Study

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The problem and the solution. Although colleges and universities are highly regarded for academics, they are also broadly criticized for inefficiency, indifference to external constituencies, and resistance to change. Helping institutions address the underlying causes of these problems while maintaining the commitment to academic excellence is the fundamental challenge facing organizational development programs in higher education. This article provides a brief case study of one such effort: the Rutgers University Program for Organizational Development and Leadership.

Keywords: organizational development; higher education; assessment; continuous improvement; strategic planning; leadership

National Context

American higher education is widely acknowledged for its many contributions to contemporary society. Colleges and universities enhance the personal and professional lives of all who attend, and through scholarship and public service, these institutions enrich the intellectual, economic, and cultural fabric of their communities, states, nations, and beyond. As Frank Rhodes (2001), president emeritus of Cornell explained, higher education

informs public understanding, cultivates public taste, and contributes to the nation’s well-being as it nurtures and trains each new generation of architects, artists, authors, business leaders, engineers, farmers, lawyers, physicians, poets, scientists, social workers, and teachers as well as a steady succession of advocates, dreamers, doers, dissidents, parents, politicians, preachers, prophets, social reformers, visionaries, and volunteers who lead, nudge, and shape the course of public life. (p. xiii)

Despite the many accolades higher education receives, in recent years, what Donald Kennedy (1997) described as a “kind of dissonance between the pur-
poses our society foresees for the university and the way the university sees itself" (p. 2) is increasingly evident. In Pursuing Excellence in Higher Education: Eight Fundamental Challenges (Ruben, 2004), I characterize this dissonance as a tension between traditional values of the academy and values of contemporary marketplace.

This conflict—and the challenges that have given rise to it—has led many within and outside the academy to call for a thoughtful review of the purposes and aspirations of higher education (e.g., Boyer Commission, 1998; Frank, 2001; Gardiner, 1994; Kellogg Commission, 1996, 2000, 2001a, 2001b; Middle States Commission, 2002; Munitz, 1995; National Association for State Universities & Land-Grant Colleges, 2001; Newman & Couturier, 2001; Ruben, 1995, 2004; Weinstein, 1993; Winspread Group, 1993). A common theme in writings on the topic is the necessity, if not the wisdom, of paying closer attention to educational outcomes and the needs and expectations of those who benefit most directly from—and those who fund—the programs and services provided by higher education (Astin, 1993; Burke, 1997; Burke & Minassians, 2001; Burke & Serban, 1997; Ewell, 1994; Frank, 2001; Jackson & Lund, 2000; Kuh, 2001; Light, 2001; Newman & Couturier, 2001; Pascarella, 2001; Ruben, 2001, 2004, 2005a; Selingo, 1999; Seymour, 1989; Spanghel, 2000, 2004; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994; Wilson, 2001).

Higher Education Institutions as Complex Systems

When greater attention is devoted to understanding the student experience and that of other key constituencies, such as prospective students, parents, alumni, legislative and advisory groups, and the general public, the complexity of any higher education institution becomes apparent. Essentially, a college or university is a system composed of distinct but interdependent components. The academic component is the domain of the faculty whose work is central to the core mission of the institution. Student life, campus services, and the administrative infrastructure represent other essential components. These are the organizational structures, facilities, technologies, personnel, and support functions that are necessary to create the kind of supportive learning and living environment in which academic excellence can be realized. Such units include offices of admissions, the registrar, financial aid, student affairs, accounting, housing, dining, parking, human resources, facilities, computer services, athletics, and alumni relations.

The academic, student life, administrative, and service components of an institution are quite distinct in many respects, and yet from the perspective of stakeholders, all are critical to excellence. Although education is primary to the mission of any higher education institution, academics is certainly not the only basis for selecting a college to attend, nor the sole determinant of
satisfaction after students enroll in the institution. Rather, the nature of the student experience, and the experience of other constituencies, is defined by a complex interaction among influences associated with academics, student life, campus services, and administration (Light, 2001; Ruben, 2004). Because these factors blend together in the day-to-day experiences of students and others, deficiencies in any of these components can have a significant impact on the perception, and reality, of excellence of the institution as a whole.

The Center for Organizational Development and Leadership (ODL) at Rutgers University

The Rutgers Center for ODL was established in 1993 and then named the Rutgers Quality and Communication Improvement Program. The impetus for the development of ODL was a faculty and staff committee report on administrative efficiency, which came to be referred to as The Red Tape Report (Rutgers, 1992). Issued in 1991, the report made a number of recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the institution, including the following:

1. creating a more welcoming environment,
2. introducing technological innovations to enhance service and efficiency,
3. establishing and enhancing user-focused systems and processes,
4. improving collaboration and communication, and
5. establishing a university program for continuous improvement.

ODL was created specifically to help address these general goals.

As ODL began to formulate its vision for how it could help create an increasingly service-oriented institution, the following aspirations were articulated for key constituencies:

- Students: Pleased to be attending their college or university; feeling they are valued members of the community with the potential and support to succeed
- Families: Proud to have a family member attending their college or university; recommending the institution to others
- Alumni: Actively supporting the institution and its initiatives
- Employers: Seeking out graduates as employees; promoting the college or university among their employees for continuing education
- Colleagues at other institutions: Viewing the college or university as a source of intellectual leadership
- The public: Valuing the university as an essential resource; supporting efforts to advance excellence
• Faculty: Pleased to serve on the faculty of a leading, well-supported institution; enjoying respect and recognition locally, within the state, nationally, and internationally
• Staff: Regarding the institution as a preferred workplace where innovation, continuing improvement, teamwork, and excellence are guiding values in all facets of the work of the institution

Early on, ODL began to develop a guiding philosophy and a way of approaching the work of organizational development within the university. Fundamentally, our approach involves the following:

• identifying best practices and standards of excellence in higher education and other sectors and translating these into the language and culture of the institution;
• identifying or developing programs, models, and approaches based on expressed and/or anticipated need;
• providing ongoing support and an incubator for new initiatives, and ensuring the institutionalization of programs and core competencies necessary for their continuation;
• promoting information sharing relative to organizational innovations and improvements throughout the university;
• encouraging and supporting the adoption and implementation of effective practices, programs, and approaches by other units; and
• serving as an organizational development research and development center for the higher education community nationally.

ODL Core Programs

Guided by our operating philosophy and the expressed needs of members of the university community over the years, the center has established six core program areas. Specific components of each area were originally developed, and are continually refined, based on conversations with leaders of higher education institutions across the country, benchmarking with education, business, and health care sector organizations; the literature of assessment, continuous improvement and organizational change; and expressed needs from faculty and staff within the Rutgers community.

1. Organizational Assessment

This core area focuses on assisting academic and administrative departments in identifying organizational strengths and improvement opportunities and setting priorities.
Excellence in Higher Education (EHE) Assessment Program. A signature program, developed early on in our work, is the EHE Assessment Program (Ruben, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). EHE is a self-assessment program for academic and administrative departments. It provides a systematic, high-level, and comprehensive organizational self-examination based on accepted standards of organizational excellence. The framework and process, which were adapted for higher education from the internationally recognized Malcolm Baldrige model of organizational excellence, helps units clarify organizational strengths and establish priorities for improvement. The most current edition (Ruben, 2005a) is also designed to integrate the language and criteria from the standards of the regional accrediting associations. To date, more than 30 academic and administrative departments at Rutgers have participated in the program. Roughly 25 other colleges and universities have found this program helpful in their assessment and improvement efforts, among them the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Wisconsin—Madison, the University of Texas—Austin, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Like the Baldrige framework (National Quality Program, 2004) on which it is based, the EHE model covers seven categories deemed important to organizational effectiveness. Although the language and definitions used to describe the framework have changed somewhat over the years and vary somewhat from sector to sector, the seven basic themes are constant.

Each EHE workshop process consists of a series of phases that move through the seven categories one at a time. For each category, the facilitation process (Ruben, 2005b) includes the following:

- discussing the basic themes and standards for the category,
- brainstorming a list of strengths and areas for improvement for the unit with respect to the category,
- reviewing best practices in the category as practiced by leading organizations, and
- scoring the unit in the category on a 0% to 100% scale to capture perceptions of the extent to which the unit is fulfilling the standards of the category.

Recent research (Ruben, Connaughton, Immordino, & Lopez, 2004) highlights the value of the EHE process. Participants in the process report that as a result of participation, they have increased knowledge and awareness of the Baldrige/EHE criteria and better understand the importance of these factors for organizational effectiveness. To the extent that awareness and knowledge are necessary precursors to action planning and change, these results are most significant. They suggest that the Baldrige/EHE self-assessment process provides a
solid foundation of knowledge and helps to define a standard of excellence that contributes an important dimension to the learning process. Our findings also indicate that the EHE self-assessment workshop and process help participants gain a sense of where their unit stands—its strengths and areas in need of improvement—and encourages the translation of theoretical knowledge into practical improvement strategies and actions.

*Needs identification and priority setting.* Most, if not all, academic and administrative departments lack the resources to carry out all of the initiatives they might ideally undertake. Establishing meaningful priorities and making difficult choices in the context of growing demands and opportunities is a critical task for leaders. In addition to the more comprehensive EHE self-assessment, the center provides information on concepts, strategies, and tools and professional assistance with data-based needs assessment and priority-setting processes.

### 2. Leadership and Strategic Planning

Activities in this area include workshops, materials, and coaching-related activities to enhancing leadership effectiveness and sharing effective practices. Strategic planning programs provide workshops and materials for clarifying the mission, vision, and goals; developing priorities: establishing measurable goals and action plans; implementing plans that create organizational commitment and assure follow-through; and leading and managing change.

*Strategic planning.* The ODLC planning model, as described in *Strategic Planning in Higher Education: A Leader’s Guide* (Tromp & Ruben, 2004a, 2004b), offers a comprehensive approach for creating, organizing, and implementing a strategic plan. The program provides step-by-step advice, case studies, and exercises for producing a successful plan, whether for an institutional initiative or a departmental review. The guide is designed specifically for leaders who are cognizant of the formidable challenges of strategic planning in an environment with myriad communication and organizational complexities.

*Management and leadership development.* A signature piece of this core area is the Contemporary Issues in Leadership Series. This program serves the university community by encouraging discussion of theory and research on current leadership topics and issues; information sharing between the higher education, K-12, business, health care, and government communities; and support of personal and professional development opportunities for faculty, staff, students, and visitors. Also offered are (a) the Student Leadership Development Institute, which is designed to provide a comprehensive and integrated approach to lead-
ership for Rutgers students from various academic majors and from all residential colleges; (b) E-Leadership, a Web-based resource of journal articles on current leadership issues that allows faculty, staff, and students to review and share perspectives on leadership in a virtual forum (E-Leadership is circulated via e-mail to faculty and staff to highlight various leadership resources, issues, and tools that have application to the university community); and (c) the Academic Leadership Program (ALP), developed as a part of the larger W. K. Kellogg Foundation leadership development initiative. The ALP program includes a Web site and programs for academic leaders on relevant issues, including Legal Issues and the Role of the Department Chair, Post-Tenure Review and Faculty Revitalization, and Pros and Cons of Distance Education.7

3. Work Process Design

Programs in this area are designed to assist with reviewing, improving, and monitoring work processes. The method incorporates concepts found in approaches such as Six Sigma and emphasizes the importance of systematic review of programs and services, measurement, and process redesign and improvement strategies (Brue, 2002; Hammer & Champy, 1993). Specific areas of focus include root cause analysis, process effectiveness (a higher education adaptation of Six Sigma), organizational development facilitation, and benchmarking and comparative analysis. The center provides facilitation, materials, and training. To date, ODL has conducted 150 workshops and 30 individual consultations in this area.

4. Faculty/Staff Workplace Culture

The center has initiated a number of activities and programs aimed at helping to make our campuses friendlier and more welcoming, cordial, and cohesive places in which to learn and work.

ODL recommended, initiated, or helped to revise various recognition events, including the faculty recognition luncheons, staff welcome program, and university professional development program. The center also assisted in the design and implementation of the newly introduced President’s Recognition Program, a university-wide program designed to acknowledge the exceptional contributions of university employees—as individuals and as members of teams—in the areas of service and collaboration.8

ODL has also developed Web-based organizational climate inventories (with versions for faculty and staff) that are available to departments, assisted academic and administrative departments with surveys and focus groups as a part of the organizational climate feedback process, and provided support in addressing related improvement needs.
The center also played the lead role in the establishment of the Retired Faculty Association (RFA). The RFA now has 200 members and is committed to promoting continued campus and community involvement of retired faculty at Rutgers by recognizing that such involvement is highly beneficial both to the university and to the individual faculty member.

ODL developed and delivered a number of programs emphasizing the leadership role that faculty, staff, and students play in creating a service-oriented, collaborative “Face of Rutgers.” Signature programs and a video, A “Higher” Education, provide a consistent approach to enhanced service and communication—a model that has been recognized nationally by other higher education institutions. ODL workshops in this area provided the foundation for and understanding of a service-excellence-based approach to some 900 individuals through 40 department workshops and the center’s Open Enrollment Series. Programs in this area are now offered through the University’s Professional Development Program.

5. Excellence Measures and Outcomes

To assist departments in defining and using measures to evaluate organizational effectiveness, programs are offered in measurement approaches; performance indicator development, benchmarking, and comparative analysis; monitoring and tracking strategies; and measurement analysis and utilization. ODL conducted more than 20 workshops and more than a dozen individual consultations in this area. Here, as in other areas, ODL has benefited greatly from the work of others (Bruncato, 1995; Burke 1997; Camp, 1995; Kaplan & Norton, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2001; Qayoumi, 2000).

6. Organizational Research Services

Organizational Research Services offers units an array of preassessment and postassessment consultation services that assist them in identifying and implementing methods for collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and integrating feedback into planning and improvement processes. Students who commit to year-long internships with ODL help provide project assistance. Participation in Organizational Research Services provides students the unique opportunity to combine the traditional graduate school experience with the application of organizational assessment beyond the classroom setting.

Through the use of a Web-based survey tool called Zoomerang—which affords the capability to design and send surveys, analyze the results in real time, and share the results with many audiences at their discretion—ODL has assisted departments in obtaining feedback on the value of their out-
reach efforts and gauging satisfaction with programs and services they provide.

**ODL Special Projects**

**President's Student Service Retreat**

The center was asked to design and facilitate a campus-wide series of retreats to explore challenges of improving academic, support, and administrative services to students. Several half-day sessions, sponsored and attended by the president and all cabinet members, leaders of student organizations, department heads, and others, led to the development and implementation of a number of university initiatives.\(^1^\)

**University Vision, Values, and Workplace Priorities**

In 2000 and 2001, the center worked with the president's cabinet to develop mission, vision, values, and workplace priorities statements. The goal was to provide a succinct statement of the aspirations of the university (vision) and articulate the broad context within which the strategic plan is being undertaken. By design, both the process and the vision and workplace priorities statements that resulted were intended to be inclusive and meaningful to all of the university's many constituencies.

**Academic Advising Project**

A preliminary study of undergraduate academic advising at the university was led by the center with guidance and support from members of the university Academic Advising Task Force, comprising faculty members, the vice president for undergraduate education, and several key administrators.\(^1^\) The results of this study formed the basis of work undertaken by the Academic Services Committee of the New Brunswick Faculty Council and the University Senate Advising Committee.

**Student Employee Orientation Project**

This is an orientation and education program for departments that employ students. It is designed to serve as a guide for introducing and rein-
forcing concepts of service excellence and for building awareness of the important role student-employees play in creating the face of Rutgers.

**Academic Administration Assessment Project**

ODL has supported the efforts of academic and administrative units to undertake academic administrator evaluations. The program is designed to provide department leaders with a simple tool for assessing their units, clarifying expectations and leadership performance, and enhancing collaboration, communication, and effectiveness within and between groups and units.

**ODL's Partnerships With the Community and Beyond**

**Corporate and Foundation Partnerships**

Partnerships with the Johnson & Johnson Process Excellence Center and Knowledge Networking Group and AT&T have provided faculty, staff, and students opportunities for information and knowledge sharing, cross-organizational learning, and the development and application of organizational theory. The partnerships have offered direct support to 32 graduate students from various units throughout the university and have supported four graduate-level courses, internships, and faculty research. Combined in-kind and direct contributions from these partnerships have exceeded $1 million during the last 10 years.

Rutgers, along with more than 100 other colleges and universities, explored ways to enhance leadership capacities within higher education as a part of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Leadership for Institutional Change (LINC) project. In support of its activities, Rutgers was awarded grants totaling $49,000 that supported, among other things, a 3-day conference on the Baldrige-based assessment model and a research study on faculty community engagement.

**Community Partnerships: New Brunswick Tomorrow**

This private, nonprofit group is dedicated to fostering public/private networks of agencies, institutions, and volunteer organizations within the city. It serves as a catalyst in developing and supporting programs that improve the quality of life in the New Brunswick community. The center assisted
New Brunswick Tomorrow with its assessment, strategic planning, and vision development initiatives for the last 2 years.

**K-12 Partnerships: Asbury Park High School Accreditation**

New Jersey is the first state in the nation to adapt the Baldrige criteria as an alternative to State Department of Education certification. A proposal submitted to the New Jersey Commissioner of Education was approved thereby allowing Quality New Jersey, Rutgers, and Hunterdon Central High School (a past recipient of the Governor’s Quality Award) to create a partnership with Asbury Park High School that would result in a model of improvement for urban districts across the state.

**ODL’s National Role**

During its 12 years of existence, the center has come to be recognized as a national leader in higher education organizational assessment and improvement. In 1999, an informal study conducted by the Chancellor’s Exploratory Committee on Continuous Improvement of the University of California–Berkeley ranked ODL as one of the leading programs of its kind in the country and the national leader in assessment. ODL has received hundreds of requests for information, guidance, and consultation from institutions around the country and internationally. From 1998 to 2000, the center developed 60 customized problem-solving programs and received requests for or consultation from 75 state, national, and international institutions. ODL has also played leading roles in the Conference Board, the Higher Education Quality Steering Committee, the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), and the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (NCCI).

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Much progress has been made in addressing the organizational and service challenges faced by Rutgers in the years since the center was launched—an effort that has now spanned 12 years and two administrations. We believe ODL played a significant role in helping to foster a more service-oriented culture, a more welcoming physical environment, a more friendly and supportive social environment, more accessible and responsive systems and services, and a heightened sense of community—a conclusion that has been supported by the 1998 Middle States Regional Accreditation Report, which looked specifically at ODL and its role on campus, and by the Rutgers 2003: A Progress Report (Center for ODL, 2003). We believe the record also demonstrates considerable success in becoming a distinguished and contributing national center for research and development in organizational development within higher education.

Not surprisingly, like other colleges and universities, we face many continuing challenges. The following recommendations for future work were among those developed from interviews and analysis conducted in the preparation of the Rutgers 2003 (Center for ODL, 2003) retrospective. Because these recommendations are relevant not only for Rutgers but also for many if not most others, they are included here.

1. Translating Vision and Values Into Practice

Vision and values statements prepared during each of two administrations endeavor to articulate the aspirations of the institution and clarify the important contributions of each university employee. Translating the language of a vision and values into workplace priorities and practices that are consistently applied, recognized, and rewarded is a continuing goal.

2. Expanding and Coordinating External Communication Efforts

Despite notable successes in enriching the public’s knowledge of and support for Rutgers, it is clear that not all of our constituents fully understand and appreciate the university as we do. We should continue to expand communication and outreach efforts to enhance institutional pride, knowledge, and loyalty among students, counselors, alumni, parents, donors, and others.
3. Encouraging Integrated Self-Assessment, Planning, and Improvement in All Administrative and Academic Units

Although there are many areas where procedures for review, planning, and improvement are in place, we should encourage broader adoption of systematic and coordinated approaches to these processes across all administrative, service, auxiliary, and academic units.

4. Simplifying and Streamlining Processes and Procedures

Much progress has been made in streamlining cumbersome processes and procedures, but a continuing commitment to service, process review, and improvement is needed. To be fully beneficial, we need an ongoing, university-wide effort—one that can be facilitated by encouraging the identification and adoption of effective practices across the institution and by promoting and rewarding cross-department/campus collaboration.

5. Identifying Excellence Goals and Measures That Align With and Support the University Vision

All units within the university—administrative and academic—would benefit from having clear criteria for assessing the quality of their collective endeavor, establishing goals, and evaluating progress toward goals.

6. Understanding and Anticipating the Needs, Expectations, and Perspectives of Students and Other Beneficiaries of Rutgers's Programs and Services

We should continue to encourage the development and use of meaningful feedback systems throughout the university. We should also expand our institutional capability for assisting both academic and administrative departments in their efforts to regularly collect, analyze, disseminate, and use the information in planning and decision making.

7. Making Internal Communication and Community Building a Priority

Each faculty and staff member has a vital and influential role to play in enhancing the quality and perception of the university. We need to continue to build an informed, cohesive, and congenial faculty/staff community, one
composed of individuals who enthusiastically accept their roles as ambassadors and advocates for the university.

8. Welcoming and Orienting Faculty and Staff

A key step to enhanced communication and community building is ensuring that all university employees understand the institution, its traditions, its values, and its aspirations. New and improved programs to welcome faculty and staff to the university have been instituted to address these goals, and these can be expanded to form a comprehensive and coordinated university welcome and orientation program that reaches all full-time and part-time faculty, staff, and student workers.

9. Focusing More Attention on Campus Culture and Student Life Issues

The campus experiences of current and prospective students, visitors, and alumni are critical to enhancing the perceptions of present and potential students and more generally for advancing the university's visibility and reputation. We want to continue to identify ways to make the campuses more vibrant and active focal points for the university community and others.

10. Expanding the Use of Technology in a Logical and Effective Manner

We need to continue efforts to ensure that information technology is used in innovative, cost-effective, and efficient ways throughout the university.

11. Improving Additional Services Through Technology

We should continue efforts to identify ways in which technology can be used to eliminate duplication and facilitate information and services that cross departments by looking for the right balance between university-wide and individual department/campus approaches and resources.

Implementing Organizational Development Programs in Higher Education: Lessons Learned and General Principles

The experience of developing, implementing, and reflecting on ODL's programs has provided many interesting lessons. As we have discussed our experiences with others engaged in similar work in other colleges and uni-
versities, we have discovered that these lessons have greater generalizability than we might have originally imagined. In fact, they provide a foundation for what might be thought of as guiding principles for implementing organizational development programs within higher education institutions. Although the following insights have emerged from the ODL experience at Rutgers, there is little doubt that these are equally applicable in many other higher education contexts and perhaps more generally.

1. Have an Overarching View of Learning and Change

As we have pursued the goals of organizational assessment and improvement, we have become increasingly aware of the importance of taking account of the dynamics of individual and organizational learning as the necessary condition for organizational change. The model presented in Figure 1 summarizes our evolving understanding of the relationship between learning and change—an understanding that guides us in our work.

A few general comments about the model. First, it applies equally in the personal and organizational domain. In point of fact, it is probably impossible to say or do much of significance relative to organizational learning or change without also addressing concomitant personal issues relative to both
learning and change. As shown in Figure 1, the framework suggests two key components of learning: phase 1, having a defined standard of excellence (foundational knowledge and/or a vision), and phase 2, having a sense of where you stand relative to that standard. Translating learning into change requires a commitment to action (to address gaps between the current position and the standard), a strategic plan for action, and meaningful follow-through.

How is this model helpful in higher education organizational development efforts? Phase 1 directs attention to leading practices in higher education but also in other sectors. It provides a rationale for benchmarking and a careful examination of models and discussions of organizational excellence such as those provided by the Malcolm Baldrige framework and more specifically by frameworks for strategic planning, process improvement, and outcomes measurement that have been developed and used successfully in other organizations.

Phase 2 points to the need and provides a rationale for assessment in all its forms and contexts—of the effectiveness of the institution, its departments, and programs; of the needs, perceptions, expectations, and satisfaction levels of constituencies (internal and external); and of learning and the full range of other mission-critical outcomes. Particularly within a higher education environment, where research is both a core value and a core competency, having data to drive and at times to justify action can be essential to the success of organizational development initiatives.

Phases 3, 4, and 5 point to the need for effective leadership and commitment within an institution, department, or program if organizational advancement is to be realized, and at the same time, these steps articulate the role that organizational development programs need to play to facilitate such outcomes.

We have found the model for learning and change in organizations to be extremely helpful as a guide to our thinking about the types of core programs and services that we have needed to develop, the sorts of projects that we should undertake, and the considerations that are important in evaluating the success of our endeavors. Although it can certainly be argued that an overarching model for learning and change is important in any organizational development work, nowhere is it more critical than in higher education where the ability to articulate the theoretical framework guiding practical action is particularly valued—especially among academics.

2. Build on, Link to, and Leverage the Successful Work of Others

In announcing and promoting a new organizational improvement program, it is tempting to stress what one believes is new, unique, or special
about the initiative. But dangers lurk in such vanity. We learned early on to be very cautious about suggesting that advances in institutional effectiveness or organizational quality somehow began with, or were exclusive to, our program.

Unless one is cautious about rhetoric, well-intentioned (and even well-informed) claims about the value of a new program can trigger defensiveness and resistance from various individuals and departments around the institution who point out that organizational advancement and quality have always been central to their department’s work. Debates about whether the new program is really new, whether it is necessary, whether it is appropriate for higher education, whether the money could be better spent by units who already have this mission, and so on are likely to ensue. These discussions may have some benefit for sharpening the focus of the organizational improvement program and the language used to describe it, but they generate more heat than light, foster defensiveness, and siphon off energies and support that could be put to better use in doing, rather than talking about, the work of organizational improvement.

Much of this can be avoided by rhetorically linking new initiatives with currently or previously valued and successful improvement projects within the institution. Doing so acknowledges and leverages the success of others, builds on traditional concerns with excellence, and creates solidarity with colleagues pursuing similar goals in the work elsewhere in the institution. When you talk about our goals and accomplishments, let the our refer to all faculty and staff in the institution, not just those associated with the organizational development center or program.

3. Let the Needs of Colleagues Help to Create the Agenda of the Organizational Development Program

Establishing credibility and a reputation for adding value to the institution requires that the staff and programming of an organizational development center or program be seen as a help in solving problems. Generally speaking, the problems that matter to colleagues will be the ones they define as critical, and these may not be the same ones that preoccupy you or the administrators who created your program. This sounds obvious enough, but it was sometimes difficult to keep from falling into the trap of emphasizing our solutions, our particular expertise, our training programs, and our approaches without giving sufficient attention to the problem as perceived by those whom we were hoping to help. The caution is to guard against becoming too rigid in one’s engagement protocol, or preferred set or sequence of services. Begin an engagement working with what concerns the
client department, and thereby earn the respect and credibility to move, over
time, to the programs and services you feel are more important and neces-
sary. Taking a longer term view, we found it to be very important to let the
patterns of client needs guide us in determining the kinds of programs and
services we needed to be developing and offering.

4. Be Extremely Cautious in Adopting Programs From Other
Institutions and Sectors

This would seem to be another obvious point. However, a great many
well-intentioned and otherwise promising higher education organizational
improvement programs have gone by the wayside because they
adopted—rather than carefully adopted—programs from other places
and/or times that were not well matched to their own institutional traditions
and culture. The stories of such outcomes involving efforts to transfer orga-
nization development or total quality management programs and materials
from business to education are numerous indeed. Even when the high-level
goals of particular programs—for example, the Six Sigma methodology,
front-line service training, or the business version of the Baldrige—are very
well suited to the generic needs of colleges and universities, they may meet
great resistance unless they are modified to fit the culture of higher educa-
tion. At ODL, we have been fortunate to have received this good advice
early on from the organizational improvement professionals at Johnson &
Johnson who were careful not to adopt the programs from other corpora-
tions without first refining them to fit the culture of health care and the
Johnson & Johnson culture.

5. Do Not Underemphasize the Importance of Language

What you call an initiative or program is important. As noted previously,
higher education has its own culture, to be sure, as does each college or uni-
versity. The decision as to whether to name and/or refer to the program or
center by the terms organizational development, continuous improvement,
institutional effectiveness, planning and quality, organizational assess-
ment, organizational effectiveness, strategic planning, leadership develop-
ment, or some combination thereof may be one of the most important deci-
sions to be made, and it is one that should be made after careful consider-
ation of the national trends in higher education, the local culture, and past
history at the institution. Note that the list of factors to consider listed in the
previous sentence did not include national trends in health care, govern-
ment, and corporate America—and for a reason. Although many of the most
interesting advances in organizational development have been developed and popularized in sectors other than education, the names used in those sectors may, but more often may not, provide the best labels for similar programs in higher education. Potentially problematic terms in higher education that work well in other sectors include *customer focus, reengineering, benchmarking, Baldrige, performance measurement,* and *Six Sigma,* each of which are potentially controversial with one key campus group or another. Each of these terms has a familiar counterpart in the customary language of higher education, and much can be gained—and little lost—in using the more familiar terms. For example, one can talk about comparisons with peer and leading institutions rather than benchmarking, or assessing departmental or institutional effectiveness rather than Baldrige, or outcomes assessment rather than performance measurement.

More than a few campuses, for example, have regretted a decision to refer to students and others as customers in their promotional and programming activities. Whereas those who are familiar with business models tend to find such a term helpful, and at the least not offensive, this is often not true for some key people in the institution—often faculty whose support for the program on campus will be critical to its acceptance and lasting success. Hours spent debating whether students are really customers is largely wasted time. It defocuses efforts from those needed to do what nearly everyone can agree is appropriate work if only different terms were used. The difference between the sound and resulting impact of customer focus and student focus can be dramatic, although from an organizational development perspective, the implications of the two are essentially the same.

6. Determine the Appropriate Balance Between Mandated and Self-Selected Participation

Will participation in organizational improvement programs and services be mandated or voluntary? The appeal of the mandated approach, of course, is that it is systematic, predictable, and controllable. This approach seems to fit the cascade models popularized in industry. On the other hand, the approach of going where there is an interest means that you spend much less time trying to convert dissenters and detractors and focus instead on building a growing network of supportive individuals and units. Our experience suggests that important institutional change can be accomplished in both ways, and depending on the size of the institution, the resources available to the program, the culture of the faculty and staff, the style of the administration, and the goals of the program, it is likely that the best approach will involve a judicious blend of the two.
7. Determine Whether the Institution Will Implement Organization Development With a Centralized or Decentralized Approach

Will organizational assessment and improvement programs be provided by a single center or department, or will various departments be encouraged to develop their own internal organizational development expertise, materials, and programs? Again, there is certainly a logic to the centralized program model in terms of predictability of program philosophy and content and control of what are likely to be scarce resources for such work in the institution. But on the other hand, if increased attention and commitment to organizational improvement is an overarching goal, if there are insufficient dedicated resources in the organizational development department to appropriately service the entire institution, and if the center or department has a limited ability to mandate consistency and uniformity across the institution anyway, there may be both wisdom and necessity in moderating one’s needs for centralized control and total consistency. Experience teaches that institutional change can be accomplished with either a centralized or decentralized model. Particularly for larger institutions, a strategic blend of a centralized and decentralized approach may be the most viable approach.

8. Focus on Academic as Well as Administrative and Service Departments

Although it is quite common to focus institutional improvement efforts first on the administrative and service departments and activities, it is important that the program, its vision, and its materials will be acceptable to academics as well. To benefit from faculty expertise, credibility, and knowledge of the academic functioning of colleges and universities, it is also useful—perhaps essential—to involve faculty members in key roles in the organizational improvement program or department or, at the least, in an advisory group capacity.

One more specific suggestion is to look for ways—from the beginning—to engage faculty as well as staff in planning and implementation and to tune in carefully to their reactions to programs, materials, and terminology. For instance, if a decision is made to develop or refine a welcome program for the institution, staff members from the human resources department but also faculty who teach or have research expertise in human resources make ideal members of a project team. Or, if communication with internal and external constituencies becomes a goal, involving staff from the university relations department and faculty from the communication or journalism department is a wise approach. Faculty and staff who have been involved in these kinds
of projects typically become supporters of the organizational development program and are also willing to share their reactions to drafts of materials and proposed projects.

Our experience also strongly suggests that it is important to look for improvement projects that will address academic as well as administrative and service needs. For instance, discussions with academic department chairs might reveal the need for a monthly forum for information sharing and networking. Or, such conversations might reveal the need for help in developing a systematic process for mentoring new faculty and leading a dialogue to revisit and/or clarify a department’s sense of direction or aspirations. Each of these needs, once identified, can be an opportunity for an improvement program to demonstrate its value and potential for contribution to all aspects of institutional functioning.

9. Serve as a Catalyst for Innovation and Improvement

As noted earlier, most organizational improvement programs and centers within higher education will never have enough resources to do all they might like to do themselves. Recruiting and engaging others in the work, creating a sense of shared ownership, and developing capacity among one’s colleagues may be necessary from a resource point of view, and it is also highly desirable in terms of the ultimate goals of the effort. This implies that center staff should position themselves as facilitators, innovators, communicators, educators, mentors, and more generally as catalysts for change—not necessarily the owners of projects. One approach is to identify projects where the center or program can play an incubator or pilot-testing role to help efforts get underway and then, once the effort is off the ground, find an appropriate department to carry the effort forward. This can be done in conjunction with another approach, which is to look for opportunities to partner with other units on campus—human resources, institutional research, planning, computing, and academic units. Or, it may be advisable to develop a cadre of volunteers or interns from throughout the institution who can be trained to be facilitators.

10. Strive to Be Seen as a Neutral Third Party With No Agenda Other Than Helping the Institution Become More Effective

In all organizations, a good deal of time and energy is devoted to organizational politics and positioning. Within higher education where there is no single, clear, easily measured bottom line, these issues often seem to take on added significance. In such a context, it is particularly important for an organizational improvement department to be seen as having no particular
agenda other than facilitating the efforts of other units and the institution to be successful. Our experience suggests that once this kind of identity is firmly established, opportunities for significant involvement in critical institutional matters will increase—even with changes in the administration. However, if the sense of impartiality is compromised, it is extremely difficult to regain trust and credibility that is lost.

11. Do Not Confuse Purposes With Tools

At Rutgers, and no doubt at most institutions, the ultimate goal is institutional improvement achieved through personal and organizational learning and change. There are many ways to pursue these purposes using a variety of available tools and techniques. But tools and techniques can be seductive and defocusing. People can become so excited about this or that technique that they lose sight of the broader purposes and mission of their work—to the point that an improvement program or center becomes identified only with particular workshops, tools, or methods. We have come to understand the importance of staying on the high road where purpose, aspirations, and core values are the basis for the identity of one’s center, not tools or techniques. Whereas core values and purposes endure, the currency of specific tools—whether the focus is process improvement, performance scorecards or dashboards, visioning, service training, leadership style inventories, or Six Sigma—comes and goes in a fashion cycle that is nearly as predictable as that of particular clothing styles (Allen & Chaffee, 1981; Birnbaum, 2002). In our opinion, it is difficult to overstate the risks of having the identity of an organizational improvement center or program too closely linked to specific tools, techniques, or particular workshops.

12. Be Prepared to Practice What We Teach

During our tenure at ODL, we have found that many of our programs have changed, many of the people with whom we work on a daily basis have changed, and, in fact, most of the senior administration has changed. We know this circumstance is not unique. As it is not unique, it is not always comfortable, but what is clear is that these are among the conditions that give rise to personal, professional, and institutional learning and change. These situations underscore the need for organizational improvement programs to be flexible and able to support different administrative structures and leadership styles. For those working in organizational improvement programs, these circumstances should become the growth opportunities for us that we persuasively advocate for others—often an easier lesson to teach than to learn.
13. Teaching in All That We Do

We have come to recognize that organizational improvement activities and programs have a special role within colleges or universities. The core mission of our institutions, of course, is education. We know that students learn in the classroom, laboratories, and libraries. But it is also the case that often even more powerful and lasting lessons are taught by the institution itself—by our systems and procedures, by the values we espouse and the extent to which they are actualized in our actions, by the way we relate to our constituents, and by the manner in which members of the community treat one another (Ruben, 2001). All who work at a college or university teach in all that they do (Ruben, 2004). With this recognition comes the significant responsibility of striving to make certain that the lessons we create through our own behavior—and through the systems, procedures, and personnel of client departments—are the very best we can provide.

Conclusion

Although all those involved in organizational assessment and improvement initiatives face many challenges, one frequently hears that organizational development work in the public sector can be particularly frustrating at times as a result of the ultrastability of the workforce, limited incentives and disincentives, complex bureaucratic structures, and the absence of a consensual view as to what constitutes the mission of organizations and institutions. Moreover, colleges and universities are notorious for the slow pace of, and often active resistance to, change. As a result, there are times when even the most optimistic among us sees a glass that truly does seem half empty.

In spite of these frustrations and the many opportunities for improvements that are apparent, it is important that we not lose sight of the fact that the ultimate purposes and values of higher education are sound and tested. It is also helpful to remind ourselves that those of us working on organizational change in higher education have the rare opportunity of helping to form institutions that will shape the lives of those who will create our future. Perhaps more than any single lesson, those of us working at ODL have a growing appreciation of the importance and the challenge that this opportunity affords.

Notes

1. When it was first formed, the center reported to the Office of the President, the vice president for Administration, and the vice president for Planning and Institutional Research. The Center is now a part of the Human Resources Division.
2. Interested readers may wish to refer to details provided at the Organization Development and Leadership Web site for further information (http://www.odl.rutgers.edu/).

3. In particular, see the National Consortium for Continuous Improvement in Higher Education (http://www.ncci-cu.org/).

4. In the language of higher education, the categories are leadership, strategic planning, beneficiaries and constituencies, measurement and knowledge utilization, programs and services, faculty/staff and workplace focus, and outcomes and achievements (Ruben, 2003b).

5. Details of the self-assessment process and scoring methodology for the workshop are provided in Ruben (2003c).

7. See http://www.academicleadership.rutgers.edu/.
10. See http://uhr.rutgers.edu/profdev/.
12. See http://www.odl.rutgers.edu/retreat/.

14. The organization is composed of representatives from the education, health care, government, and business sectors and is dedicated to expanding the use of organizational excellence philosophies and methods to improve New Jersey life.

15. The consortium now has 55 member institutions, including leading and peer institutions such as Berkeley, Stanford, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Wisconsin, Cornell, Illinois, the State University of New York—Buffalo, Penn State, the University of Southern California, and Dartmouth as well as association memberships that include the American Council on Education, the American Association for Higher Education, the National Association of College and University Business Officers, and others.

16. See http://www.odl.rutgers.edu/resources/.

References


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