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Leading Organizations for Universal Design

Joseph B Berger, University of Massachusetts - Amherst
Duong Van Thanh, University of Massachusetts - Amherst

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Leading Organizations for Universal Design

Joseph R. Berger and Duong Van Thanh

The purpose of his article is to provide a model for helping campus leaders create and sustain efforts to fully incorporate Universal Instructional Design (UID) throughout their institutions. The article uses a multiple dimension model of organizational behavior as the basis for making recommendations to support this type of institutional transformation.

College and university student bodies have become more diverse over the last 30 years, especially in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and a wide variety of physical and learning disabilities. Unfortunately, the ways in which postsecondary institutions are structured has not changed to keep pace with these demographic shifts. Universal instructional design (UID) (Bremer, Clapper, Hitchcock, Hall, & Kachel, 2002) is an educational intervention that has been demonstrated as an effective means for supporting students with disabilities and campuses more supportive of diverse learning than have traditional approaches to collegiate education (Bremer et al., 2002; Dolan & Hall, 2002; Higbee, 2001). Universal institutional design is an educational philosophy and set of educational resources and strategies designed to make learning more accessible to students with disabilities. UID is used to consider the needs of people with disabilities and to design educational environments and processes that support and enable all students to succeed.

Postsecondary institutions that embrace the challenges of transforming their organizations to serve all types of students will be providing badly needed leadership in American higher education. However, leading organizations to accomplish this vitally necessary but extremely difficult goal will be a demanding and complex task. Given the challenges associated with the comprehensive incorporation of UID into the educational core of college and university organizations, the purpose of this article is to present a multidimensional model that draws on existing organizational behavior literature to help campuses create leading organizations for universal instructional design.

A FRAMEWORK FOR LEADING ORGANIZATIONS

Leading organizations is a complex and challenging task, and successfully implementing fundamental organizational change is even tougher. Such tasks are made even more difficult because such leadership and organizational structure are often seen as distinct issues. Successful organizational transformation requires focusing on the relationship between leadership activities and various aspects of organizational activities (Berger & Milen, 2000). From a leadership perspective, it is important to recognize that individuals and teams do not provide leadership in a vacuum; they lead in organized contexts we call colleges and universities—these individuals are leading organizations. From an organizational perspective, successful organizations have clearly defined goals, and cohesive organizational structures and processes that contribute to the well-being of those inside and outside of the organization—these are leading organizations. Whether the emphasis is on leadership or organization, two key aspects of a larger whole are central—how to best facilitate leading organizations.

Colleges and universities that successfully incorporate universal design into the fabric of the entire institution will be leading organizations in two ways. First, they will have leadership that can develop internally and implement comprehensive organizational transformations that can sustain universal design as a core process that is embedded across the full range of organizational activities found in higher education (such as teaching, advising, etc). Second, in so doing they will become a leading organization that serves as a model for the rest of higher education in terms of the ability to provide equitable excellent education to all students. The purpose of this article is to describe the various aspects of organizational leadership in ways that need to be taken into account by institutional leaders in order to successfully embed universal instructional design across the entire fabric of the institution.

As organizations, colleges and universities have been similar in two important respects: providing leadership for society (Senge, 2000). The implementation of universal design throughout higher education appears to be an ideal opportunity for higher education to provide such social leadership by creating a pedagogical shift that provides for greater equity while benefiting learning, knowledge acquisition for all types of students. However, initiating and sustaining any significant shift in well-established organizations is a challenge to those who undertake and lead such change (Kotter, 1995). It has been demonstrated that most organizations fail to reach their potential because of ineffective strategies for change (Kotter, 1995). Without changes in organizational leadership, educational organizations present unique challenges to change agents (Birnbaum, 1988; Fullan, 2001). Three are good reasons for focusing on leading organizations that may lead to changes in institutional structures and cultures. For instance, a healthy organizational culture can promote identification (who we are), legitimacy (what we want to accomplish as an organization), communication (with whom we work), coordination (with whom we work), and development (what the dominant perspectives and tasks are) (Davies, 1997). Such issues and questions are fundamental to creating sustainable transformations in organization, substantial is important to identify the key conceptual tools that facilitate the most effective means for addressing these key issues and questions. It has become increasingly clear that the best way to examine change within higher education organizations is to use multidimensional models for understanding organizations (Berger & Miles, 2000; Birnbaum, 1988).

Although there is recognition that universal design has numerous implications for educators at all levels (Higbee, 2001), the responses of academic leadership, governance, and organizational effectiveness of an institution to a growing need of universal design have not been examined through a comprehensive analysis. There appear to be few useful models to help guide the process of organizational change toward an effective implementation of universal design. The main purpose of this article, therefore, is to provide a rationale for the types of changes and implementation strategies warranted in higher education. Second, with reference to a multidimensional model of leading organization and universal design, the article defines the essential components for a framework that suits the actual decision-making process and environment of higher education. While universal design contains technical considerations and accessibility issues, the multidimensional model of leading organization involves a variety of human activity that reflects human communities functioning at university campuses.

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ORGANIZATION

Organizational behavior and structure has been defined in a variety of ways in higher education literature and elsewhere. Indeed, there is no single theory of organizational behavior; rather, there are many theories (also called schools, perspectives, traditions, frame-works, paradigms, and models) of organizational behavior, which collectively cover a great deal of conceptual terrain (Safritz & Ott, 1992).

While some theories build upon earlier works, others have tried to take the most salient features of key theories and develop models of organizational behavior to view organizational behavior as a multi-faceted construct. Examples of such classifications that have been used to describe organizational behavior at colleges and universities include Bolman and Deal's (1992, 1997) four frames, Birnbaum's (1988) models of how college works, and a variety of other classifications of organizational functioning (e.g., Bush, 1995; Kuh, 2003). Each frame, model, or dimension adds a unique perspective into how organizational behavior is perceived. Recent work on organizational behavior and student outcomes identify five dimensions of organization, each illustrating different hypotheses regarding the nature of organizational life and change. The resulting five dimensions of organizational behavior at college campuses are labeled in the following manner: systemic, bureaucratic, collegial, symbolic, and political.
THE BUREAUCRATIC DIMENSION—BUILDING STRUCTURAL SUPPORT FOR UNIVERSE LEARNING

Formal structure and bureaucracy provide what is perhaps the most common frame of reference when people think of organizations. The bureaucratic dimension is the key concept for viewing organizations that is based on the assumption that organizations exist primarily to accomplish established rational goals. The roots of this tradition can be traced to the work of German sociologist Max Weber who originally described bureaucracies as formal social networks dedicated to limited goals with a hierarchical structure that maximizes coordination and communication (Weber, 1947). The organizational characteristics of these networks match the descriptions that Max Weber, who originally described bureaucracies as formal social networks dedicated to limited goals with a hierarchical structure that maximizes coordination and communication (Weber, 1947) provided. The characteristics include the following:

1. Technical competence as the primary criterion for appointment, the appointment rather than election of officials, the payment of fixed salaries directly by the organization, the recognition and respect of rank, the exclusive employment of the organization by workers, the presence of security through the tenure system, and the separation of personal and organizational property (Weber, 1947). From this perspective, there are ideal structural forms that can be described and implemented to fit any number of circumstances, including the comprehensive implementation of UDI throughout a college or university campus. Specialization and division of labor, and coordination of activities to hierarchical authority are essential to the effectiveness of a bureaucratic organization, such as a postsecondary institution.

The bureaucratic perspective describes not only the structural arrangements of an organization but also the specific norms and ideological embedded in it. The most fundamental value is the provision of rationality, in which the second is the need to organize all organizational defined goals and the need to allocate productive and to enhance the strategic capacity of the university while developing multiple autonomy to operating units below the "departmental" (Davies, 1991, pp. 271-281). The following sections describe the key dimensions of organizational behavior, and each dimension serves as a lens for understanding the different aspects of organizational structure and behavior that must be addressed in order to successfully implement UDI into the core educational activities of colleges and universities that wish to assert their roles as leading organizations in this manner.

THE COLLEGIATE DIMENSION—FINDING CONSENSUS ABOUT UDI

The bureaucratic approach focuses on structuring the task of UDI implementation, but the human element of organization also must be addressed, and the collegiate dimension provides an organizational lens for focusing the tool’s capabilities. A comprehensive approach to UDI focuses on features of organizational structure in terms of collaboration, equal participation, concern for human resources, and the use of consensus to establish goals and to make other important decisions. The under-lying assumption of this dimension originated from the human resource perspective (Bennis, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Birnbaum, 1988; Kuh, 1996, 2003). Parsons (1947) suggested that the collegial is perhaps the most appropriate way to view an organizational where the technical competence of faculty members plays a more important role than the bureaucratic aspect of the administration. Indeed, this model best fits with the design of the collaborative structure of educational institutions as professional organizations.

Kuh (2003) emphasizes that the collegial view consists of two enduring values of academic institutions: professional education and the student learning experience. Faculty and staff are specialists in their field, and therefore, they expect to determine the conditions under which they perform. Academic settings depend on the shared work and responsibilities of individuals who cooperate to make decisions. As a matter of fact, faculty and professional staff tend to welcome the collegiate view of organizations as the preferred way to organize and work in the complex organizations of higher education. Power also tends to be informal, through network influence (Kezar, 2001).

Given the collaborative professional norms of the academy, UDI can be most successfully implemented on campus if faculty are provided the means to be autonomously engaged in the process of planning for and implementing UDI as a comprehensive campus-wide system. Whereas, the bureaucratic dimension emphasizes the way in which administrative hierarchy and structure must be dealt with in order to transform campuses across the concepts of UDI, the collegial dimension as a conceptual lens highlights the need to focus on faculty involvement as an integral part of the organizational transformation process. Higbee (2001) notes that faculty members have been among the first to apply the
concept of universal design to their own profession and organization, and through this faculty who are already engaged with UID can provide professional leadership to others by combining with UID, other faculty and institutions with the need to involve. The implications of this approach include the need for the use of committees and consensus building as a means for incorporating UID from the ground up in the university as a professional organization.

Although the collegiality approach is often assumed to be the best model of organizing for postsecondary institution, and even though it is highly congruent withUID, a purely collegial approach has disadvantages and causes individual dimensions associated with the organisation. These include the collegial dimension on faculty, the way in which the organization's line on faculty (Kuh, 2003) notes that there is a tendency to oversimplify life in universities and colleges. Likewise, the collegial approach is often perceived as including only faculty and marginalizing other members of the community. Therefore, it will facilitate greater involvement and ownership in UID among various constituencies and will promote the principling of the organization.

THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION—MANAGING THE MEANING OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Many organizations, particularly institutions of higher education, are characterized by purposes and structures that are loosely coupled, problematic goals, unclear objectives, fluid participation, and high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty (Baldrige et al., 1977; Birnbaum, 1988; Cohen & March, 1974; March & Olsen, 1979). The ways in which individuals make meaning in an organization are therefore essential to understanding the ways in which organizations actually function. Emphasis on organizational meaning is best characterized from a symbolic perspective. The following set of propositions summarizes the symbolic dimension. Every organization and all of the activities in the same social world (Kuhn, 1996) and the same events can have very different meanings for different people because of differences in the schema they use to interpret their experiences. Additionally, many of the most significant events and processes in organizations are ambiguous and uncertain. Faced with uncertainty and ambiguity, human beings create symbols to resolve confusion, increase predictability, and provide direction (Bolman & Deal, 1992, 1997). Many organizational events and processes are important more for what they express than for what they produce. These symbolic events and processes include secular myths, rituals, ceremonies, and sagas (Bolman & Deal, 1992). A quick look around any college campus provides ample evidence of the strength of the presence of the symbolic dimension on campus. Colleges are full of a wide variety of organizational symbols that convey shared institutional values through artifacts (college logos, seals, architectural styles), rituals (orientation, final exams), ceremonies (commencement, convocations), and stories (history, tradition, and the founding of the institution or exemplary teachers and campus leaders). The symbolic nature of organizational behavior is also evident in the presence of different campus subcultures based on roles (student vs. faculty vs. administrator) and the different organizational subgroups that exist in each, such as disciplines and departments, personal characteristics, and ideologies (Birnbaum, 1988; Kuh, 2003). Moreover, the
symbolic behavior can lead to a powerful symbolic culture in settings, while providing a fragmented organizational understanding in others. A more complete view of the symbolic dimension acknowledges that the symbolic nature of organizations is composed of multiple layers. Embedded within these multiple layers are some values and norms that permeate the entire organization, while others operate at the sub-cultural level, and still others operate at the individual level (Martin, 1992). The success or failure of initiatives has rested not with the technical merits of the idea, but with the meanings that became attached to it. Higher education is traditionally resistant to change and incorporating new approaches because meaning can become so fragmented or differentiated. On the other hand, a well-crafted vision, particularly when it can be associated with existing campus values, can create higher levels of shared meaning. This is, of course, more difficult on large campuses. But even where differentiation is likely to occur, awareness of formal and informal campus subgroups can help leaders who wish to promote UID find ways to help different organizations develop a sense of their own identity and, more generally, of their own unique role in the larger academic community.

The symbolic dimension focuses less on the rationality of decision-making and more on the symbolic behavior and more on the importance of sense-making. Birnbbaum (1988), Bolman & Deal, 1992; Weick, 1969). Meaning making becomes a more valuable skill than rational decision-making (Morgan, 1986). Hence, from this perspective, the creation, understanding, and interpretation of a decision is more important than the decision itself. The process of meaning-making becomes more important than the product. The product of decision-taking is likely to mean different things to different people (Birnbbaum, 1989, 1990). Therefore, as UID is incorporated on university campuses, project leaders need to monitor the ways in which UID is used, how it works with individuals and groups to interpret and re-interpret those meanings as appropriate.

Attention also should be given to the ways in which the importance of UID can be symbolically reinforced on campus. The use of logos, slogans, and ceremony can help create greater shared meaning if they are developed to reflect underlying values rather than to manipulate and/or symbolize behavior. The use of UID by formal and informal campus leaders and the inclusion of UID in highly visible key campus programs and events will symbolically reinforce the importance of UID across a wide range of individuals and groups for example, the incorporation of UID principles into organization and convocation activities not only makes practical sense, but also provides symbolic forums for demonstrating the effectiveness of UID in a variety of educational settings.

The SYSTEMIC DIMENSION—the LARGER CONTEXT OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN

The impact of environmental forces on higher education has increased dramatically in recent years. One of the most obvious influences include increased state and federal government intervention: access to information via advanced information technology, the continued rise of professional affiliations and associations, the development of university-industry partnerships, and the globalization of American society (Petersen, 1997). As a result, colleges and universities can be aptly described as open systems with interacting components and the ability to import people, ideas, and resources through permeable organizational boundaries and transform them into educational and scholarly outputs. These organizations are comprised of varying numbers of subunits and processes that have traditionally been only loosely coordinated (often referred to as "loose coupling" [Weick, 1969, p.3]).

The following assumptions are derived from previous work on environmental systems theory (Wiener & Mingers, 1988). The systemic dimension of organizational behavior. Organizations are open systems in which external connections and internal structure are interdependent, such that the environment in which the organization operates has a direct and reciprocal influence on how the organization is organized as organizational boundaries disappear and organizations become isomorphic, or similar, in form (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1996). In other words, organizations become more like one another and like each other. For example, empirical evidence suggests that patterns of faculty role performance at the institutional level have become increasingly homogenized during the past 20 years (DeWitt & Gutek, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Moberg, 1987; Moberg & Dey, 2000). From a neo-institutional perspective, organizations have institutional components embedded within them, in contrast to the traditional open systems view that organizations are embedded within environments. The idea that organizations need to protect the organization from environmental turbulence.

Three institutional mechanisms—correlative, integrative and normative—create discontinuities toward institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 1996). Correlative (or regulative) mechanisms occur when dominant or elite organizations force dependent organizations to conform to certain structures and practices. Integrative mechanisms occur when less successful organizations borrow ideas from more successful, or legitimate, organizations. Normative mechanisms occur when professional organizations and organizations choices of common ideas and practices across a field of organizations. Knowledge of these mechanisms can help further the incorporation of UID on campus. The Americans with Disabilities Act...

LEADING ORGANIZATIONS FOR UNIVERSAL DESIGN

It is already clear that the impetus for UID comes not only from the internal efforts of a campus but also from external sources in the broader environment. These environmental forces can best be understood in higher education from a neo-institutional perspective. Neo-institutionalism arose in response to the overemphasis on technical and rational processes found in traditional forms of open systems theory, including classical institutionalism. Neo-institutional theory responds to this oversight by focusing on persistence and order over change, emphasizing common understandings, routinization, and cognitive schema over intentionality and interest group conflict; and emphasizing cognitive learning over newcomer socialization (Cromwell, Boyd, & Mawhinney, 1996). From this perspective, organizational structures are less a reflection of the technical tasks of an organization than they are codified myths that legitimize the espoused purposes and functions of the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organizations will be most successful to the extent that they are as organizational boundaries disappear and organizations become isomorphic, or similar, in form (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1996). In other words, organizations become more like one another and like each other. For example, empirical evidence suggests that patterns of faculty role performance at the institutional level have become increasingly homogenized during the past 20 years (DeWitt & Gutek, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Moberg, 1987; Moberg & Dey, 2000). From a neo-institutional perspective, organizations have institutional components embedded within them, in contrast to the traditional open systems view that organizations are embedded within environments. The idea that organizations need to protect the organization from environmental turbulence.

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Joseph B. Berger is an associate professor of education and chair for the Department of Educational Policy, Research, and Administration in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He has published numerous articles, chapters, and reports focusing on the impact of policy and organizational behavior on student success in a variety of educational settings and has received several national awards for his research.

Duong Van Thanh works in the Division of Residence Life at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and serves as a consultant for the National Evaluation Systems. She earned an Ed.D from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and has received several honors and awards including Fulbright fellowships. She has previously served as the Senior Program Officer for the International Relations Department in the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training and as the Program Coordinator for a series of training programs leading to Education for All in Vietnam.