

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

---

### Implementing University Change: Intersections of Academic Policy and Institutional Culture

Leslie R. Zenk

*University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

Organizational culture is a key aspect for higher education leaders as they make decisions. This paper examines a policy change process at a large, research university using Bolman and Deal's (2013) symbolic frame as a lens through which to examine aspects of the institution and the policy change process. Results reveal that attention to stakeholders and stakeholder-tailored communication are important when implementing policy change, and institutional culture matters in whether that change is implemented successfully. The results of this study are useful for academic leaders, directors, administrators, faculty members, and other institutional members at colleges and universities who are engaged in innovative change efforts and policy implementation at their institution.

*Keywords:* organizational theory, institutional culture, organizational culture, policy, leadership, decision making, higher education

Organizational culture is an important aspect for higher education leaders as they make decisions. For academic leaders to make effective decisions and to implement change, an understanding of and attention to institutional culture is necessary. According to Fralinger and Olson (2007), "University leaders are increasingly becoming more aware of the concept of culture and its significant role in university change and development" (p. 86), and the failure of change efforts "...can often be attributed to insufficient understanding of the critical role of culture within organizations, including real and perceived rewards and disincentives, formal as well as informal role distributions, and the philosophy and style of senior managers" (p. 89).

In recent years there has been increased attention placed on academic policies at the undergraduate level that facilitate college completion. However, according to educational research company EAB (2015), policies can sometimes lead to unintended consequences: "Academic requirements, organizational models, and academic policies are designed without student success in mind, resulting in unintended roadblocks to completion" (p.8). This study therefore examines the intersection of the areas of academic policy and institutional culture to

consider how an understanding of institutional culture may contribute to the successful implementation of policy.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

All organizations have a culture. Fralinger and Olson (2007) described: “university culture can also be thought of as the personality of an organization” (p. 86). While broad organizational theory is frequently applied to higher education, colleges and universities are unique in that they are also “institutions.” Institutions have a particular set of defining characteristics including their adherence to history, their ties to society and the greater environment (Czarniawska-Joerges & Sevón, 1996), and three additional unifying characteristics: a single purpose, existence apart from participants, and persistence over time (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

For years, organizations were thought of solely in terms of their structure, but we now know that organizations can also be understood by also looking at their cultural elements (see Clark, 1970; Fralinger & Olson, 2007; Kuh & Whitt, 1998; Simsek & Louis, 1994; Tierney, 2008). Bolman and Deal (2013) in their seminal work identified four “frames” to understand various organizational phenomena: bureaucratic (structural), human resource, political, and symbolic (cultural). These frames can be used as lenses through which we see and examine aspects of organizations or, in this case, institutions. Institutions do not exist within one of these four categories, but rather these lenses can be applied to help understand various organizational phenomena. A symbolic or cultural lens allows for a focus on how institutional elements such as symbols, values and beliefs affect organizational functions (Clark, 1970; Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Koprowski, 1983; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Tierney, 1992; Zucker, 1988). Clark’s (1970) well-known concept of organizational saga describes one type of symbol or “story” that serves as a type of glue to hold organizational members together not just to one another, but more importantly to the organization itself: “...a saga produces unity. It binds together the structural elements, it links internal and external groups, and it merges...individual and organizational identities” (Clark, 1970, p. 255). An organizational saga can be important tool and resource due to its ability to reel in institutional members who may develop a very strong affinity and emotional commitment to the institution.

Kezar and Eckel (2004) noted that institutional culture must be understood when examining decision making; without this contextual knowledge, elements may be misunderstood or ignored completely. An institution’s sense of historical place and the assumptions about who it is meant to serve may also impact decision making (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 2004). Mission is part of this institutional culture and is an example of the external realization of culture (Tierney, 2008). Institutional culture can also be seen in reward systems, socialization mechanisms, language, or definitions of appropriate behaviors and values that permeate an organization (Gayle, Tewarie & White, 2003). According to Gayle, Tewarie, and White (2003), effective university cultures exhibit appropriate behavior, teach relevant values, and motivate members of the institution. Particularly relevant yet missing from the current research on colleges and universities is the intersection of organizational culture and the establishment and revision of the academic policies that govern institutions.

## CONTEXT OF STUDY

The institution studied is a large, urban research university of approximately 28,000 undergraduate and graduate students in the southeastern United States. University of the Southeast<sup>1</sup> (UOS) is part of a public education system governed by a central statewide board. In 2014, UOS instituted a significant change to the course withdrawal policy for undergraduate students, limiting the number of course withdrawals available to students from an unlimited number to a maximum of 16 credit hours over their undergraduate career. This policy change was necessary due to new regulations passed by the state board aimed at facilitating student success at all campuses within the multi-campus system. As a policy change with the potential for significant impact on advisors, students' academic careers, and faculty in the classroom, successful implementation and communication of the change was imperative.

### Course Withdrawals

The policy change examined governs how students can withdrawal from courses. There are a number of reasons why students may withdraw from a class, including that they may be overwhelmed with the difficulty of the material in the course, or they may be receiving an unsatisfactory grade and wish to withdrawal without penalty (EAB, 2015). The state board chose to regulate the total number of course withdrawals to help mitigate delayed degree progress; students who withdraw from one course are likely to withdraw again, which can affect their progress toward obtaining their degree (Adams & Becker, 1990). In addition to delayed degree progress, implications of withdrawing from courses can include lost financial aid and changes to academic standing at the institution such as probation and suspension status.

## METHODS, DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To examine the phenomenon of academic policy change, the following research questions were considered:

- (1) What is the relationship between institutional culture and the implementation of academic policy changes?
- (2) To what degree is institutional culture considered during the academic policy change process?

The cultural analysis employed is intended to reveal underlying forces that may contribute to behaviors within the institution, offering further explanation on the utility of institutional culture in examining the academic policy change process.

The study used a qualitative case study approach allowing for an in-depth examination of a complex phenomenon through multiple sources of evidence. A strength of case study is the ability to consider a variety of sources to examine "contextual conditions" (Yin, 2002). Through the use of case study the researcher recognizes that context is important and useful in examining

---

<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym has been used for the institution studied

phenomena that exist within a bounded system, such as an institution. Case studies are frequently used to examine phenomena that are reasonably well-defined but poorly understood.

## Sampling

The sampling method used to select the institution was a non-probability sampling procedure that was both purposeful and criterion-based. As a non-probability sample, the institution (case) studied was not identified randomly, but rather was chosen because it met a pre-determined criterion that was important to the aspect being examined: the institution was undergoing a significant policy change. Trustworthiness and internal and construct validity were enhanced through triangulation, the analysis of information from two or more sources to identify information convergence (Patten, 2003). Additionally, the external validity of the study was enhanced by using what Merriam (1998) refers to as “rich, thick descriptions” (p.211): by providing a detailed description of the institution and phenomenon studied, readers are able to determine to what extent the situation mirrors others they have experienced – and ultimately to what extent the findings can be applied to similar situations.

## Data Collection

Data for this case study was collected through document analysis and observation of the phenomenon. Document analysis was necessary to help understand the context of the policy change, the culture of the institution, and the details surrounding the change. Observation, a firsthand account of a phenomenon that takes places in a natural setting (Merriam, 1998), was used to observe patterns of interaction and to understand the change as it unfolded.

*Document analysis.* Document analysis was used to understand the context surrounding the change and the ways in which the change was communicated to key stakeholders. Documents for review included those obtained in person and on the institution’s website (see Table 1). Special attention was paid to those documents that referenced the policy change as well as the institutional history, guiding principles, and other elements of institutional culture. All documents were assessed for authenticity by considering how the document was acquired, who the author was, and what the author was attempting to accomplish. Merriam (1998) notes it is particularly important to consider the context that surrounds the creation of documents; data obtained from document analysis can work to ground the study in context.

TABLE 1  
Documents Analyzed

| <b>Policy-Related Documents</b>             | <b>Institutional Culture-Related Documents</b> |
|---|--|
| Orientation Counselor Training Presentation | Website: About UOS                             |
| Memo to Faculty, Staff and Students, I, II  | Information/Media Kit                          |
| Withdrawals Best Practices Memo             | University Mission Statement                   |
| Policy on Withdrawal from Courses at UOS    | Website: University History                    |
| Flier on Withdrawal from Courses at UOS     | Institutional Fact Sheet                       |
| Table Tent on Withdrawal from Courses       | Website: About Founder                         |
| UOS Academic Policy: Withdrawals            | Website: Founder                               |
| Academic Advisor Training Presentation      | Website: UOS Undergraduate Admissions          |
| Parent Newsletter Article                   | Website: UOS Graduate Admissions               |
| Suggested Standard Syllabus Language        | Fall 2014 Fast Facts                           |

*Observation.* Participant observation was conducted through first-hand accounts of activities, conversations, interactions, relevant meetings and training sessions through unstructured observation (see Table 2). Emphasis was placed on understanding the process as it unfolded, observing each phase of the policy implementation, and learning about the relationships among stakeholders. The role of the researcher was “participant as observer,” an active role in which the researcher is involved in the activities (Merriam, 1998). Written field notes were compiled following observations for data analysis.

TABLE 2  
Observation Events

| <b>Committee Meetings</b>                       | <b>Other</b>                                |
|---|---|
| Repeat & Withdrawal Policies Working Group      | Orientation Counselor Training Presentation |
| Student Success Working Group                   | Academic Advisor Training Presentation      |
| Associate Deans Group                           | Faculty Council                             |
| Faculty Academic Planning & Standards Committee |   |

## Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study involved within-case analysis using an iterative method drawing from grounded theory and constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 1998); doing so allowed the researcher to refine concepts in a reflective way. Open coding was used to determine and create major thematic categories and documents were analyzed to help understand the context and details surrounding the policy change and the culture of the institution. For example, information regarding history, traditions, and guiding principles was used as part of the cultural analysis to provide contextual understanding of the institution. Information regarding the academic policy change itself was used to corroborate the data obtained from observation (Yin, 2002). A complete list of documents analyzed is located in Table 1.

## RESULTS

Results of this study indicate that: (1) culture is considered during the policy change process and there is a relationship between institutional culture and the implementation of academic policy changes; and (2) institutional culture is revealed during the academic policy change process through an attention to stakeholders and stakeholder-tailored communication.

### Context Matters: An Understanding of Institutional Culture

Examination through a cultural lens provides insight into institutional values, norms, and beliefs. At UOS, a pervasive cultural element includes the story of the institution's founder (UOS, 2015c, 2015g, 2015h), which illuminates the way in which the institution was created and shaped; culture can derive from the founders of the organization as they choose the initial goals and direction (Schein, 2004). The founder at UOS is described as an "educator, trailblazer [and] innovator" (UOS, 2015h), and the university's story as "one of perseverance and strong leadership" that reflects the growth of the region in which the institution is located (UOS, 2015c). In this sense, the story of the founder at UOS may serve as a type of "saga" (Clark, 1970) in which institutional members believe in the story and the message it represents. At UOS the saga of the founder provides insight into some of the underlying institutional values that guide the university and its members.

Similarly, culture can be understood in the historical context of the institution; it is important to remember that institutions are not formed spontaneously, but rather with a distinct purpose. At UOS, a mission that pays special attention to the needs of the community and its residents provides a foundation that permeates the institution (UOS, 2015a). As an institution whose goal is to serve the region, UOS has a student population that includes a high percentage of alumni from the area (52%), first generation college students (32%), and students on state and/or federal financial aid (75%) (UOS, 2015b, 2015i). This policy change therefore was particularly important as it had the potential to impact students' ability to make progress toward their degree, obtain a seat in their desired course, or impact their ability to borrow federal or state financial aid. Analysis shows that an understanding of and attention to this important piece of institutional culture was paramount in guiding communication around the policy change.

### Communication Matters: Stakeholder-Tailored Communication

Early in the implementation process of the policy, UOS formed a working group to carry out the policy change which included broad representation of campus administrative offices, advisors, and faculty. Results indicate that the working group identified stakeholders that included advisors, faculty, current students, prospective students, and parents of current students. The working group considered the stakeholders involved and strategized communication methods to explain the policy change within a framework of institutional values.

Effective communication strategies recognize that different stakeholders are likely to prefer different modes of communication. For example, in determining a communication plan for current students, campus leaders developed a clear, multi-modal campaign with recognizable visual components (UOS, 2015d, 2015e). It was important to provide students with next steps to

help them determine the appropriate strategy (Roe Clark, 2005). A simple visual graphic was incorporated into signs, fliers, and table tents that were distributed across campus in the residence halls, dining facilities, and academic buildings (UOS, 2015e, 2015f). Academic advisors were also provided posters and fliers to hang in their offices and distribute to advisees. All printed communication drove students, parents, advisors and faculty members to a website of comprehensive information (UOS, 2015d) that explained the rationale for the policy change, the timeline for implementation, and what it meant for each stakeholder group. An updated Frequently Asked Questions section of the website existed to collect questions submitted and to provide answers as questions arose (UOS, 2015d). Timing of the communication plan was provided at the start of the registration period for the Fall term, providing the information at a point when it was meaningful to the student. Additional strategic communications were planned for the first academic year of implementation, including technological tools to alert students of the policy when they withdrawal from a course, and automated email reminders for those who had already withdrawn (UOS, 2015d). At UOS, institutional culture was revealed during the academic policy change process through this specific attention to mission and stakeholders and by communicating appropriately with these key constituents.

### Limitations of Study

While several steps were taken in an attempt to increase the validity and reliability of this study, limitations do exist. In addition to the limitation of using a single case, possible researcher biases that must also be made explicit are associated primarily with the researcher's dual role as both researcher and employee at the institution studied as well as the "participant as observer" method of observation. It can be difficult to prevent personal bias by qualitative researchers: as humans we have our own particular views of the world that can impact our ability to be objective; Merriam (1998) emphasizes the importance of being attentive to the biases that can exist within qualitative research, including its subjective nature. In addition, according to Merriam (1998), the drawback of using "participant as observer" is the lack of depth of information that may be revealed. The collection of data through document analysis is also limiting because documents are not created for the purpose of research and, therefore, can be incomplete or inaccurate. Finally, understanding cultural elements can be challenging because they are often ingrained and can be difficult to describe (Gayle et al., 2003).

## CONCLUSION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

Academic policy is a silent but necessary part of university life – you don't know it's there until you need it. This holds particularly true for students, who are often bombarded with policies and regulations during their initial orientation to the institution, but unless the information is deemed relevant, it is easily forgotten. Results of this study indicate that for institutional leaders it is important to understand cultural elements such as student and faculty values, expectations, and behaviors when determining how to implement academic policy.

Literature on institutional change reminds us that change processes and the ability to successfully implement change depend on a successful understanding of organizational culture. Kezar (1994) contends that modern leadership research often ignores subtleties and context and

instead provides overarching global strategies that may not be useful in changing situations. Studying an organization through a cultural lens can therefore reveal underlying aspects that contribute to individuals' behaviors within the organization. At the University of the Southeast, underlying institutional values of perseverance, innovation and entrepreneurship, as evidenced by the saga of the institutional founder, combined with an explicit mission focused on serving the region and its high percentage of first-generation college students who have financial need, resulted in a thoughtful change to academic policy that emphasized timely communication to relevant stakeholders.

Two primary aspects for future research are revealed in this study: (1) the examination of the role of the leader and (2) analysis of the methods of communication used during policy change. This study does not explicitly examine the role of leaders and the ways in which leadership contributed to decisions made regarding policy change. In addition, this study did not anticipate the important contribution of strategic communication and related materials to this change; future research should include a critical examination of the ways in which communication to stakeholder groups can impact policy change at colleges and universities.

Results of this study illuminate and lend further evidence to the notion that institutions should evaluate and have a firm understanding of campus culture before beginning a change process, and effective change efforts must be integrated successfully into the existing culture (Hearn, 1996; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). While the results of this study provide only one example of a change process, culture and change are ubiquitous at institutions worldwide. Successful establishment and implementation of academic policy requires institutional leaders to consider the culture of their institutions.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, J. L., & Becker, W. E. (1990). Course withdrawals: A probit model and policy recommendations. *Research in Higher Education, 31*(6), 519-538.
- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2013). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Clark, B. R. (1970). *The distinctive college: Reed, Antioch, and Swarthmore*. Chicago, IL: Al-dine Publishing.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Czarniawska-Joerges, B., & Sevón, G. (1996). *Translating organizational change*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Deal, T. E., & Kennedy, A. A. (2000). *Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- EAB. (2015). *Guiding student choice to promote persistence: Tools, technologies, and policies that support retention and timely completion*. The Advisory Board Company: Washington, DC.
- Fralinger, B., & Olson, V. (2007). Organizational culture at the university level: A study using the OCAI instrument. *Journal of College Teaching and Learning, 4*(11), 85-98.
- Gayle, D. J., Tewarie, B., & White, A. Q., Jr. (2003). Structural and cultural elements of governance. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, 30*(1), 41-108.
- Hearn, J. C. (1996). Transforming US higher education: An organizational perspective. *Innovative Higher Education, 21*(2), 141-154.
- Kezar, A. (1994). Leadership challenges at urban and metropolitan universities: Communities, stakeholders, money, diversity, and change. *Leadership in Metropolitan Universities, 5*(3), 6-9.
- Kezar, A., & Eckel, P. (2002). The effect of institutional culture on change strategies in higher education: Universal principles or culturally responsive concepts? *The Journal of Higher Education, 73*(4), 435-460. doi:10.1353/jhe.2002.0038

- Kezar, A., & Eckel, P. (2004). Meeting today's governance challenges: A synthesis of the literature and examination of a future agenda for scholarship. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 75(4), 371–399. doi:10.1353/jhe.2004.0022
- Koprowski, E. J. (1983). Cultural myths: Clues to effective management. *Organizational Dynamics*, 12(2), 39–51. doi:10.1016/0090-2616(83)90032-3
- Kuh, G., & Whitt, E. (1988). The invisible tapestry. *ASHE ERIC Higher Education, Report No. 1*. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED299934.pdf>
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Patten, M. L. (2003). *Understanding Research Methods: An Overview of the Essentials* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Pyrczak Pub.
- Roe Clark, M. (2005). Negotiating the freshman year: Challenges and strategies among first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(3), 296-316.
- Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Simsek, H., & Louis, K. S. (1994). Organizational change as paradigm shift: Analysis of the change process in a large, public university. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 65(6), 670–695. doi:10.2307/2943824
- Tierney, W. G. (1992). Cultural leadership and the search for community. *Liberal Education*, 78(5), 16–21.
- Tierney, W. G. (2008). *The impact of culture on organizational decision making*. Sterling: Stylus.
- University of the Southeast. (2015a). *University mission statement*. Retrieved July 7, 2015 from [site redacted].
- University of the Southeast. (2015b). *Institutional fact sheet*. Retrieved September 7, 2015 from [site redacted].
- University of the Southeast. (2015c). *University history*. Retrieved September 7, 2015 from [site redacted].
- University of the Southeast. (2015d). *Policy on withdrawal from courses at university of the southeast*. Retrieved September 7, 2015 from [site redacted].
- University of the Southeast. (2015e). *Flier on withdrawal from courses at university of the southeast*. Retrieved September 7, 2015 from [site redacted].
- University of the Southeast. (2015f). *Table tent on withdrawal from courses at university of the southeast*. Retrieved September 7, 2015 from [site redacted].
- University of the Southeast (2015g). *About founder*. Retrieved July 10, 2015 from: [site redacted].
- University of the Southeast. (2015h). *Founder: Educator, trailblazer, visionary*. Retrieved July 10, 2015 from: [site redacted].
- University of the Southeast. (2015i). *Fall 2014 fast facts*. University of the Southeast.
- Yin, R. K. (2002). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods, Applied Social Research Methods Series, Vol 5* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Zucker, L. G. (1988). Where do institutional patterns come from? Organizations as actors in social systems. In L. G. Zucker (Ed.), *Institutional Patterns and Organizations; Culture and Environment* (pp.23-49). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.