The two cultures of academe: An overlooked planning hurdle

Author: Robert R. Newton

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4402

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Published in Planning for Higher Education, vol. 21, pp. 8-13, Fall 1992
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Coming Transformation of Community Colleges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Two Cultures of Academe: An Overlooked Planning Hurdle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fund-raising for a Single Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do Big Decisions Committees Work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Town-Gown Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping Students Ease Into College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designing a Distinctive Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Reform College Athletics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning from an Economic Basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can We Restore Academic Quality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing the Complex World of Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Marvelous and Disturbing Novelty of Desktop Publishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagining the Future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning to Get Real</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why planning sometimes stumbles, and how colleges can increase its success.

The Two Cultures of Academe: An Overlooked Planning Hurdle

Robert Newton

At the 1991 SCUP annual conference in Seattle I encountered several academic administrators who observed that the conference had a dearth of sessions designed specifically for academic planning. The purpose of SCUP, one person said, seemed to be the adaptation of corporate and architectural planning models to higher education. Several of these administrators, and many faculty I know, are uneasy that the spread of such business planning techniques will erode traditional university values.

On the other hand, the strategic planning literature and articles about the behavior of professors and high school teachers charge that most faculty and teachers have been reluctant to change despite radically new conditions, seem oblivious to crucial matters such as money, enrollments, and public opinion, and prefer “organized anarchy” (Cohen and March 1974) to a coherent institutional purpose, harmonious new initiatives, and thoughtful organizational adaptation.

I think both camps are right. Moreover, I believe the tension is indigenous to the universitas magistrorum et scholarium, the corporate body of masters and students. A university or college is necessarily both a corporation, or organized, business-like body or guild, and a very personal, sometimes contentious community of teachers and learners. Though numerous scholars have written about the “culture” of individual institutions in higher education (Clark 1980, 1987; Dill 1982; Kuh and Whitt 1988; Schein 1985; Tierney 1988, 1990), I think every good college and university has within it two cultures, not unlike the two mindsets that C.P. Snow described in The Two Cultures 33 years ago (1959).

These two cultures in academe make
college or university planning an especially
difficult venture, a fact not always suffi­
ciently acknowledged. And it means that
higher education planning requires an un­
usual degree of mutual understanding and
respect, of diplomacy, and of generosity of
spirit. It suggests that higher education
planning will always be different in its pro­
cedures and unusual in its style.

To get the two cultures to agree on one
collaborative course of strategic action for
the institution requires an exceptional un­
derstanding of the history and nature of the
university and a special kind of leadership.

The corporate community

The one culture—the corporate commu­
nity—tends to view universities mainly as
business organizations, as pieces of the
$140-billion, 3400-institution U.S. higher
education industry, delivering education and training to clients at a price they can af­
ford. Persons in this culture point out that
universities have substantial capital assets
and huge operating budgets. (Major U.S.
universities today have annual budgets of a
half billion to one billion dollars a year.)

Many colleges and most universities con­
tain residence halls, scientific laboratories,
restaurants, parking garages, sports arenas,
libraries, offices, theaters, student centers,
classroom buildings, religious chapels, and
power plants. The campus police force at
some suburban and rural institutions can be
as large as the law enforcement division of
their surrounding towns.

People of this culture are mindful that
modern colleges and universities have a
highly differentiated workforce: experts in
accounting and finance, personnel, psycho­
logical counseling, institutional research,
admissions and financial aid, construction
and maintenance, alumni relations, pur­
chasing, fundraising, government lobby­
ing, athletic coaching, public relations,
computer programming, information and
records management, mail distribution,
and book acquisition, not to mention in­
house legal counsel and job placement of­
ices (Rehder 1979). Almost none of these

Every good college and
university has within it
two cultures.

In this culture, central planning, and
continuous change and adaptation are nec­
essary, supervision is normal, the financial
condition of the institution is of vital inter­
est, and the physical appearance and work­
ing condition of the facilities are important.
The university usually is viewed as a busi­
ness enterprise—of a significantly different
kind. The corporate community may boast
that “our university is one of the largest
employers in our region,” or that “ ours is a
well-run organization.”

The community of scholars

The second culture—the community of
scholars—views the college as a near-sac­
cred institution with a special and indis­
pensable mission, a mission that is more similar to that of medicine and religion than to that of industry and commercial services.

For many faculty, teaching is not just part of a job description but an integral component of a vocation that passes on the best of civilization’s accomplishments. Students are not consumers or clients, but neophyte members of a select intellectual community devoted to exploring the perennial questions of humankind and the best new ideas and methods of inquiry of the scholarly disciplines. Knowledge is important not just to prepare for a career but for its own sake, and one of the duties of the masters is to inspire students to extend the heritage of knowledge, great ideas, and great art.

Members of this culture believe they are the central, driving force of the college’s vitality, reputation, and success. The university changes and moves forward through the work of individual scholars; changes should emerge from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Under the benevolent and seldom intrusive guidance of a department head or dean, individual teachers and scholars set their own teaching and research agenda and decide what courses should be taught.

Members of the second culture believe they are the central, driving force.

The organization is held together by collegiality and persuasion and not by administrative direction and compliance. The academic organization chart should be simple and flat rather than complex and hierarchical, resembling a small cottage enterprise rather than a complex corporation. To those in this culture, faculty and students are only loosely joined to the institution, and are free to pursue the vague, general purpose of the university in their own idiosyncratic ways. Evaluations are based on flexible, professional, peer judgments rather than on precise and management-determined standards.

Finances, enrollments, and physical plant operations are the concerns of others. Planning, marketing, recruiting outstanding students, and campus architecture are the distasteful task of non-academic personnel, whose duty it is to provide for those in the scholarly culture, just as hospital administrators minister to physicians. Teaching, research, and learning are the central and real business of the campus; all other campus business is operational support for the academic mission.

Planning, assessment, and change

The complications caused by the coexistence of these two cultures—the corporate and the scholarly—are illustrated by looking at three activities: planning, assessment, and institutional change.

Planning in the corporate community is viewed as an activity that is necessary, rational, comprehensive, and fairly centralized. It should be strategic, a series of coordinated actions to strengthen or reposition the college in relation to its competitors and to opportunities or threats in the environment. The planning process places considerable reliance on data: applicant pools, space, revenue and expenditure analysis and projections, faculty workloads, construction costs. The process also monitors external forces—demographic shifts, changes in government funding and regulations, economic fluctuations—that affect the college.

Criteria should be established against which alternative courses of action can be weighed. Timetables and measurable results are useful, as are the assignment of tasks to specific persons or departments to implement the strategic plan.

In contrast, those in the university’s scholarly community view planning as mostly intuitive, piecemeal, and decentralized. Individual professors and departments should set the scope and direction of their own and their discipline’s activities.
Planning sessions should resemble a colorful town meeting rather than seminars with statistics and agendas. The values, needs, and preferences of the academics, not quantitative data, financial facts, or external changes, are central. There is a disdain for overly systematic planning approaches and their accompanying terminology. Personalities, research priorities, and internal politics more than comprehensive planning should determine the university’s future. The scholarly culture sees consensus as uniting and democratic, hard decisions as divisive and disruptive. Academics view precise objectives, timetables, and measurable results as bureaucratic measures imposed by people who do not understand the subtleties of higher learning.

As for assessment, the university’s corporate community tends to view it as a difficult but reasonable new demand by legislators, government agencies, taxpayers, parents, and employers who want to know how much students are really learning in college. It makes sense to focus on results rather than processes. They find the behaviorist premises—learning objectives, program design to reach the objectives, delivery system, and the assessment of outcomes to see if the design and delivery met the hoped-for objectives—logically sound. This culture sees little reason that intellectuals should not be able to measure what they are accomplishing. Isn’t assessment of a student’s progress a vital ingredient in education?

The members of the scholarly community, on the other hand, view the assessment movement as a simplism concocted by persons who are ignorant about the purposes and achievements of higher learning. They reject the behaviorist approach to teaching and learning. Rather, most scholars view themselves as intellectual midwives who help students become more accurate and precise, more philosophical, more tolerant of other’s views, more open to beauty, elegance, and artful expressions, more committed to inquiry and questioning, more aware of the glories of their heritage and faith, more creative in their thoughts, and much more. They reject the production-oriented notion that a university should churn out graduates with measurable skills and knowledge for successful careers. To this culture, the assessment movement is an attempt by philistines to control the content and manner of instruction by prescribing outcomes.

Planning sessions should resemble a colorful town meeting.

The two cultures also differ on how change should take place at a college or university. To illustrate this, look at one change: the diffusion of computers and communications technology on campus.

To those on the corporate side of the university, the campus needs a comprehensive plan for changing to a more highly technological mode of operation, which is indicated by comparisons with other innovative organizations. After a study of where computers and scholarly communications and research are likely to go in the future, a multi-year strategy should be developed, with hardware and software standards, distribution schedules, funding sequences, and a promotion effort to inform everyone. Mandatory training programs should be developed to assist everyone in using the new equipment, and additional support persons should be hired. Faculty and support personnel should be provided with new equipment they are expected to use so that the university can stay at the cutting edge of modern technology and its possibilities.

To those on the scholarly side of the university, technology is a useful tool for the dissemination and discovery of knowledge, but its uses vary a great deal from department to department, office to office, and person to person. Engineering faculty, economists, physicists, sociologists, and English composition instructors may prefer certain kinds of technology while scholars
in theater, law, and molecular genetics may prefer other kinds—made by other manufacturers.

---

**The assessment movement is an attempt by philistines to control the content and manner of instruction.**

The diffusion of technology among faculty tends to be reactive rather than proactive, disorderly rather than neatly planned. Change should be stimulated by clever, enthusiastic persons in each department or school. University administrators should accommodate the requests of individual scholars rather than create some comprehensive purchasing plan, with the aid of outside consultants, for everyone on campus. Change is necessarily uneven, with some departments with professors who stimulate others through their own creative use of computers or teleconferencing rushing ahead, and other departments lagging behind.

**E pluribus unum?**

How can colleges and universities carry out a single, widely accepted strategy or an organizational change if each campus contains two distinctive cultures, both of which are indispensable to the successful functioning of the institution? Without a commitment to preserve the intellectual core and the values that support it, a university will lose its purpose and defining characteristic. But without the expertise to operate a contemporary, forward-looking educational corporation, a university will lose its viability.

Though the tension between the two campus cultures is ineradicable and perennial, I suggest there are three steps that institutions can take to bring the two cultures closer together.

One strategy is to help both cultures recognize that they are inextricably entwined and that neither can exist without the other. The corporate culture exists for the scholarly community culture; the scholarly culture exists only with the support of the corporate culture. Those who understand the complementary roles of the two cultures—planners, deans, the president and academic vice president, senior faculty, enlightened trustees—need to keep reminding both sides of the contributions of the other and correcting expressions of provincialism.

Historically, the community of scholars is the original culture, and academic purposes should guide major institutional decisions. And the chief academic officer, among peers on the organizational chart, should be regarded as the first among equals. At the same time, the scholarly culture must recognize that a modern college or university is a large, multifaceted organization, much of whose operation is beyond the expertise of faculty scholars and student leaders. Scholars have no grounds to be supercilious.

On primarily administrative issues, from budgeting to architectural planning, those in the corporate culture should consult the community of scholars. On primarily academic issues, from new programs to research proposals, those in the scholarly community should consult the appropriate members of the corporate community. By consulting each other, and sitting on committees together, persons in both cultures are most likely to avoid cultural isolation and to appreciate each other’s talents.

If a considerable number of people in the two campus cultures appreciate each other, praise and respect each other, and if scholars can recognize the many tasks of running their institution as well as the demands of their own discipline while support staff persons recognize the requisites of creative teaching and scholarship, the chances of unified, collaborative planning are vastly increased.

The second step is to delineate clearly the decisionmaking spheres of the corporate and scholarly cultures. Conflict usually occurs when one culture interprets the
other as straying inappropriately into its domain. As Ken Mortimer and T.R. McConnell famously noted (1978), there are three decisionmaking domains:

1. decisions that should be made by the scholarly community;
2. decisions that should be made by the corporate leaders; and
3. decisions that require the expertise and participation of both cultures.

In the domain of the teachers and scholars are decisions about the design of individual courses, requirements for degrees, structure of the curriculum, evaluation of student achievement, development of library collections, and assessment of the qualifications of candidates for appointment and promotion. Clearly in the administrative sphere are decisions of financial stability, maintenance of facilities, budgetary control, campus security, and compliance with government regulations and legal procedures.

It is more difficult to define the areas of overlap. But the construction of academic facilities, student admissions and activities, salaries and benefits, overall academic program design and new programs, and strategic planning are examples. The type and degree of involvement by each of the two cultures should vary with the issues. For example, in expenditures on academic computing, the faculty’s role in setting the priorities should be authoritative but the administrators’ role in deciding the funding and implementation should be paramount.

Issues on which the decisionmaking is shared present a special challenge. Not only do these decisions require unusual tolerance, understanding, and cooperation, they also require an accommodation to different styles of decisionmaking: the more rational, financial, and outcomes-centered approach of the corporate culture and the more intuitive, principled, and process-centered approach of the academic culture.

The third step is for each college or university to appraise its own competitive situation and the kind of academic services it offers, and then to mix the corporate and scholarly cultures in an appropriate balance for its planning. Some colleges, for instance, are at ease with an educational corporation that efficiently provides students with services that the public wants. At such institutions the corporate culture should be allowed to have a stronger influence on the planning, setting of priorities, and pace of change. Other colleges or universities, however, subscribe to the view of the campus as a scholarly enclave focused less on preparing individuals for the workplace than on exploring perennial questions and advancing knowledge. At these institutions the scholarly culture should play a stronger role in decisionmaking.

Or, if a college is in financial difficulty or undergoing radical changes the corporate culture may have to be stronger in the planning process. But if a college is determined to improve the quality of its faculty, teaching, and scholarship the academic culture may need to be primary in shaping the planning.

Obviously, university planning is most likely to be balanced if an institution has key individuals in both cultures who are at home both in the world of the educational corporation and in the community of scholars. Such men and women should be groomed, nourished, and honored. It is an abundance of persons who understand the necessity of both cultures that makes integrated institutional planning successful.