

Principles for Creating Student-Focused Postsecondary Organizations: A Multiple Case Study

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Introduction

Learning Outcomes

As co-learners, we will be able to...

- Describe and apply a set of principles for creating a student-focused postsecondary organization to fictional case studies
- Articulate examples of how this study's findings are relevant to our current institutional contexts and/or personal practice
- Apply theory and research-based principles to fictional case studies that complement and contrast the current context of our home institutions

Session Outline

Overview of *Supporting Student Success Study*

Purpose of the Current Study

Theoretical Underpinnings

Research Questions and Design

Summary of Research Findings

Implications

Activity: Case Study Analysis

Supporting Student Success Study



Program of Research

Examines the relationship between postsecondary institutions' organizational structures, cultures, and student retention

Phase 1 and 2:

- Qualitative interviews and focus groups
- 9 universities and 5 colleges across Ontario
- Students, faculty, student affairs professionals, senior administrative leaders

Phase 3:

- Quantitative survey of faculty and staff
- 24 institutions (7 community colleges and 17 universities)
- 7 Canadian provinces represented
- Total of 5,664 cases (3,293 faculty; 2,371 staff)

Purpose of Current Study

To examine how:

- Communication
- Resource allocation
- Institutional culture

Are perceived as shaping the development of student-focused organizational approaches

Theoretical Underpinnings

Resource Dependency Theory

Hillman, Withers & Collins, 2009; Leslie & Slaughter, 1997; Tolbert, 1985

Organizational Ecology

Carroll, 1984

Institutional Logics

Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012

Current study tests propositions stemming from above frameworks advanced by Pitcher, Cantwell, and Renn (2015)

Research Questions and Design

Study Methods

Qualitative multiple case study design (Yin, 2014)

- Unit of analysis= student affairs and services divisions

Exploratory approach (Yin, 2014)

- Within cases, heuristic approach (Merriam, 2009) utilized to understand participants' perceptions of how student-focused organizational approaches are developed

Central Research Question

How do student affairs and services staff perceive their institution's organizational structure and culture with respect to the development of a student-focused approach for program and service delivery?

Sub-Questions

1. How are communication and resource allocation perceived as interacting with the development of student-focused organizational approaches?
2. How do perceptions of communication, resource allocation, and institutional culture compare between more centralized and more decentralized organizational structures?

Site Selection

Sites purposefully selected to represent:

- Diverse range of institution types
- Years of incorporation
- Amount of research activity
- Geographic location
- Residential-to-commuter student ratios
- All within a common provincial policy context (Ontario)

This research focuses on the larger research-intensive universities included in the broader sample

Analysis

- NVivo software
- Open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014)
- Theory-driven approach re: collapsing codes into categories
- Themes analyzed across cases
- Pattern matching techniques (Yin, 2014)

Research Findings

Findings

Institutions:

- Centralized University A
- Centralized University B
- Federated University A
- Federated University B

Degree of centralization determined by:

- Number and nature of reporting lines
- Distribution of student services

Building Relationships and Communicating

Participants at all institutions commented on importance of developing and maintaining informal networks

- Perceived to be critical to one's ability to support students
- How informal networks tended to develop varied:
 - Inward versus outward focus
 - Role of physical spaces and proximity of services
 - Strategies utilized to foster positive relationships with other staff, students, senior administrators, and faculty

Interpreting the Relative Value of Resources

Shared concerns regarding perceived declines in financial and human resources and impact for students (and staff)

Centralized University A, Centralized University B, and Federated University A:

- Impact on relationship building and communication

Centralized University A and Federated University A

- Space and proximity of student services impact student and staff experience

Viewing Students and the Role of Student Affairs and Services

Priority: Providing the best possible support to students

Variable foci of support:

Federated University B:

- Students as clients and customers
- Educating students re: value of involvement and opportunities

Centralized University A, Centralized University B, Federated University A

- Students as co-facilitators and co-decision makers
- Emphasis on students' holistic development

Utilizing Strategic Planning to Offset Organizational Weaknesses

Centralized University A, Federated University A, and Federated University B:

- Strategic plans provided clarity and direction re: how the unit and institution would navigate critical issues
- Examples given of how strategic plans influenced practice
- Strategic planning helped to mitigate tensions re: resources

Centralized University B:

- Fewer references to specific planning documents, however, comparable levels of discussion re: departmental and institutional values as fostered by senior leaders

Implications

Principles for Creating Student-Focused Postsecondary Organizations

As a student affairs and services unit,

1. Strive towards an “optimal” balance of inward and outward foci.
2. Enable and empower stakeholders to develop ongoing communication and relationships that support student success... and themselves!
3. Consider how space and proximity of services influence communication, organizational culture, and student success

Principles for Creating Student-Focused Postsecondary Organizations

4. Use strategic planning processes and outcomes to augment organizational strengths and offset weaknesses or gaps.
5. Work as a community of stakeholders to define and co-create the learning environment to which you aspire.
6. Invite, listen to, and engage with the perspectives of faculty, students, and other community members.
7. Foster individual and organizational resilience so that “when the going gets tough”, students’ success and learning remain paramount as organizational values and overall objectives.

Activity: Case Study Analysis

Thank You!

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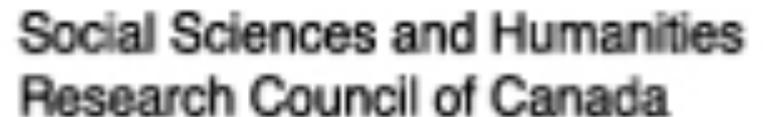
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We appreciate your support.



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Principles for Creating Student-Focused Postsecondary Organizations

- As a student affairs and services unit, strive towards an “optimal” balance of inward and outward foci
- Enable and empower stakeholders to develop ongoing communication and relationships that support student success... and themselves!
- Consider how space and proximity of services influence communication, organizational culture, and student success
- Use strategic planning processes and outcomes to augment organizational strengths and offset weaknesses or gaps
- Work as a community of stakeholders to define and co-create the learning environment that you aspire to become
- Invite, listen to, and engage with the perspectives of faculty, students, and other community members
- Foster individual and organizational resilience so that “when the going gets tough”, students’ success and learning remain paramount as organizational values and overall objectives

Activity

Based on the case study that your table has discussed:

1. What are the opportunities for creating a student-focused postsecondary institution?
2. What are the challenges or risks?

Using the principles for creating a student-focused postsecondary institution,

1. What might you do as a senior leader?
2. What are some things that new professional and mid-level student affairs and services staff might do?
3. What might other stakeholders (faculty, other staff, students community members, alumni) do to address the opportunities / challenges / risks?
4. What should be considered in implementing the ideas you developed?

What implications might these findings have for your own work?

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Case Study #1: Centralized University

Centralized University is located in a quintessential university town approximately 2.5 hours (driving distance) from the next major city. It is a large, research-intensive university with approximately 25,000 students. The institution offers a wide range of academic programs at the bachelors, masters, and doctoral levels. The campus is primarily residential- the vast majority of students live on campus for their first year of study; those who eventually move off-campus tend to live in private accommodations within walking distance of the campus. A smaller population of undergraduate students continues to live locally with their parents. Most older undergraduate students and graduate students choose to live off-campus for the duration of their degrees.

The Division of Student Affairs and Services can be described as a highly centralized in its organizational structure. All of the units within the division have a reporting line to the Vice President of Students (VPS), who represents the division in campus-level conversations including those related to budgetary allocations.

Centralized University finds itself highly positioned in the national rankings for research-intensive universities. The university does not rank as high in international rankings given the greater weighting on research outcomes over student outcomes. A diversity of stakeholders (representing senior administration, faculty, alumni, and students) are interested in growing the international reputation of the university and improving the university's position in international rankings is viewed as an important means towards achieving this goal.

Perceptions of institutional reputation have fueled ongoing debate amongst the many stakeholders regarding what ought to be the mission, vision, and values of Centralized University. For example, some faculty have expressed a view that the university should place a greater focus on academics. Amongst student affairs and services staff, however, there is a general sentiment that students' holistic development (inclusive of academics) ought to be the priority. There is a noticeable tension between some faculty and student affairs and services staff over issues of whether the faculties or the student affairs and services division are optimally positioned to provide student services and engage students in co-curricular programming.

Such tension is becoming increasingly apparent to new and mid-level student affairs and services staff, as a result of formal and informal messaging related to budgets and resources. There is growing concern and anxiety amongst student affairs and services staff regarding anticipated budgetary cuts and how this could impact their employment. As much as the student affairs and services staff are concerned about job security, they are almost equally as concerned about how budgetary reductions will impact their ability to support students. It would seem that feeling like one is providing the best possible support to students is a strong motivating factor and intertwined with workplace satisfaction.

Centralized University is known for high levels of student engagement in co-curricular programs and other aspects of student life. Other colleges and universities have admired the Division of Student Affairs and Services for achieving such high levels of student participation and engagement. Students generally demonstrate good awareness of the available programs and



services on campus, though off-campus first-year students, mature and graduate students sometimes indicate feeling less informed and positioned to become involved.

Student demand for access to services and co-curricular learning opportunities continues to grow, however, physical spaces and program sizes have not been able to keep up with demand. Space is at a premium: a general lack of space, somewhat inappropriateness of spaces for certain programs and services, and physical distance between frequent campus partners have been viewed as undermining the ability of staff to communicate across functional areas. Given the current budgetary climate, new facilities are unlikely to be built for some time. Some staff worry that upcoming changes might result in physical reorganizations that will further undermine their ability to serve students.

Although staff within the Division of Student Affairs and Services are encouraged to communicate and collaborate with fellow student affairs and services staff and faculty, there appears to be some hesitance amongst staff to engage with the faculties. For example, staff have described experiencing what feels like a metaphorical “tug of war” over how students ought to be involved and allocating their time (eg. academic versus co-curricular involvement) as a result of comments made by some faculty members. For example, one prominent faculty member recently publicly questioned the perceived amount of time that students are spending in co-curricular involvement opportunities given that it is “after all, an academic institution”. Some faculty have commented that the budget for the student affairs and services portfolio is likely “overpadded” and that services and programs would be better utilized if provided within academic faculties.

These views have fueled a common perspective amongst student affairs and services staff that faculty don’t seem to know, understand, or appreciate what staff contribute to student success. Staff often describe a perceived lack of knowledge, support, and engagement on the part of faculty regarding student affairs and services. That being said, some units such as the academic resources centres, community-based service learning, accessibility services, health and wellness, and counselling units report greater interactions and a better quality of relationships with faculty. Faculty most often describe their interactions with student affairs and services staff as being on an “as needed basis”, though a small number of faculty can be described as regularly engaged in co-curricular programs and/or providing proactive referrals to services.

Centralized University is home to undergraduate and graduate student governments. The student governments have a strong presence on campus and representatives are highly active and expect to be engaged in important decision-making that affects students. Overall, the relationship between the student governments, staff, and faculty can be described as very good. That being said, both the undergraduate and graduate student government representatives are feeling concerned about rumours of significant upcoming changes at the university. They are particularly concerned that as of yet, there has been little consultation.

Case Study #2: Decentralized University

Decentralized University is located in an urban environment in a small city. It is a large, research-intensive university with approximately 35,000 students. The institution offers a wide range of academic programs at the bachelors, masters, and doctoral levels. The vast majority of students commute to campus; those who live on campus are typically domestic students from out of town or international students. Those living off-campus are located throughout the city.

At Decentralized University, multiple faculties, departments, and ancillary units collectively provide student affairs and services for the campus. Certain student affairs and services units are centralized such as the Division of Student Affairs and Services reporting to the Vice President of Students (VPS). Student services provided within the faculties report to respective academic deans; in some cases these services have a dotted reporting line to the VPS. Other student services are revenue-generating ancillary services (such as residences, food services, and recreation) and report to a Vice President of Operations (VPO). The VPS, VPO, and academic deans all participate in campus-level conversations related to budgetary allocations. That being said, while ancillary services are responsible for generating their own revenue and do not receive funding from the university, the volume of revenue and discretion in allocating such revenue has resulted in some centralized and faculty-based staff in viewing the ancillaries as metaphorical “fat cats”; in other words, that it is somewhat unfair that those working in the ancillaries can access larger budgets when centralized and faculty-based staff have encountered significant budgetary reductions. Perceived inequities have encouraged protectionist behaviours surrounding programs and resources, particularly in the units affected most by reductions to the university’s overall budget. Such protectionism has undermined communication and collaboration between student affairs and services staff in the centralized, faculty-based, and ancillary units. Although ancillaries have been less affected from a financial standpoint, budgetary reductions to centralized and faculty-based student services have had a negative impact on their ability to serve students through ripple effect. All would likely agree that one of the most frustrating aspects of the decentralized model happens to be the decentralized nature of budgets.

Multiple senior administrators lead, plan, and advocate for student affairs and services, albeit tend to prioritize the interests of their respective portfolios. That being said, when visions and voices converge, it creates powerful advocacy for students and services. It is important to note, however, that the senior administrators tend to express differing views regarding the degree to which student affairs and services ought to focus on service provision versus holistic development. For example, the Deans tend to describe the purpose of faculty-based student services (such as academic advising, career services, etc.) as providing excellent information and guidance that will in turn support students towards achieving academic and career-related success. The VPS tends to focus on the contributions of the centralized unit towards students’ holistic learning and development. The VPO combines these foci and describes ancillary services as equally prioritizing the provision of excellent service while supporting students’ holistic learning and development. These variations in foci can at times challenge collaboration across the centralized, faculty-based, and ancillary student services.

There is a common sentiment amongst student affairs and services staff that faculty don’t seem to know, understand, or appreciate what student affairs and services staff contribute to student



success. That being said, staff working in the faculties tend to demonstrate greater understanding of faculty culture. Staff working in the faculties also appear to engage more frequently with faculty members when compared to colleagues working in the centralized division and ancillaries. Faculty members tend to initiate more contact with faculty-based services given that they view these as designed and endorsed by associated academic programs. Given that faculty-based services are often located in the same buildings as faculty offices, organic interactions between faculty members and faculty-based student affairs and services staff have unfolded.

Student affairs and services staff often describe that faculty are relatively unaware of student services. That being said, several units including the academic resources centres, community-based service learning, accessibility services, health and wellness, and counselling units tend to report higher levels of interaction with faculty. Faculty members tend to describe their interactions with student affairs and services staff as being on an “as needed basis”, though a smaller number of faculty can be described as regularly engaged in supporting co-curricular programs and/or providing proactive student referrals to services.

A campus-level survey recently found that the majority of students have little awareness of student services and where to find them. Given that the majority of students live off campus, significant amounts of energy are consumed by efforts to reach out to students. Although the campus has received lower scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement as compared to peer institutions, student involvement is on the rise. It is also relevant to note that while some students are not overly involved on campus, they are actively involved with families, employment, and/or other communities off campus. Students describe off-campus community involvement as both complementing and challenging their overall learning at university.

At Decentralized University, no single student government provides a consolidated student voice: faculty-level student associations are equally as persuasive as the campus-level undergraduate and graduate student governments. Clubs can be affiliated at multiple levels: with the campus-level student governments, faculties, the centralized Division of Student Affairs and Services, residence life, and recreation. Typically, the university has positive relationships with these student groups, however, it can be challenging to communicate with so many student entities and leaders. Unfortunately, communication breakdowns are frequent and student governments often find themselves feeling as if they were informed late in change-related processes.

Current perceptions of Decentralized University’s reputation have encouraged the university president to initiate a reevaluation of the institution’s mission, vision, and values. In doing so, the president announced that the campus will work together as a community to develop a new strategic plan. The previous document focused on improving the university’s national and international rankings; the president has proposed a shift in mindset towards improving the student experience, which will in turn improve institutional reputation by word of mouth. The president has also proposed greater internationalization throughout the university as well as increasing the university’s overall international presence. While the first goal is likely to bolster the efforts of student affairs and services staff, questions remain regarding how a shift in mindset towards further internationalization could impact resource allocation (eg. financial and human resources) for student affairs and services. Overall, significant changes are on the horizon.