

ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY:
EVALUATING DEPARTMENTAL EFFECTIVENESS

Case Study— Student Academic Services at Seattle Pacific University

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Introduction

Around the year 1930, the business world first began to use the word *organization*, which is defined by dictionary.com as: *the structures through which individuals cooperate systematically to conduct business*. In addition, it wasn't until the 1950s that the term ***organizational theory*** started being used in publications (Starbuck, 2003, p. 441). Today, this relatively new science studies how organizations can most effectively meet the needs of customers, employees, and stock holders. In the world of higher education, organizational theory can be used by universities to improve the effectiveness of their departments. In recent years, many excellent articles and books have been written for just this purpose.

In one of these books, *Reframing Organizations* (1997), authors Bolman and Deal discuss how the research in this field can be consolidated into four perspectives: the structural, human resource, political, and cultural frames (p. 15). These frames are windows through which leaders in higher education can view and evaluate their universities and departments. While each frame is important, it is the holistic implementation of all four frames that optimizes success. In light of Bolman and Deal's research, as well as some additional insights from other texts, the following article will analyze both the recent history and current quality of service in Student Academic Services at Seattle Pacific University (SPU). This analysis will specifically focus on the positive changes that have been implemented in the last decade. Furthermore, this study will give leaders in higher education an evaluative framework in which to use organizational theory to assess the effectiveness of their own departments.

Organizational Theory: The Structural Frame



Courtesy of <http://www.allposters.com/st.asp?CID=65BAB5A521D543AF932916715F779DC8&search=90771&c=c&cat=90771&page=2&startat=>

Using the metaphor of a body, the structural frame is the bare bones of a department. Each department requires a structure that best meets its unique needs. The right structure will depend on the department's goals, strategies, technology, and environment (Bolman & Deal, p. 57).

There was a strong consensus within the Student Academic Services department at SPU, just over ten years ago, that the internal structure was no longer meeting the needs of the department. Furthermore, the mission statement at the time was overly complex and proved too cumbersome to bring insight and clarity in developing departmental goals. Employees, students, and an outside consultant agreed that a change in structure was needed. The initial evaluation determined that SPU students were being "handed-off" too frequently. A student's experience at SPU began with an admissions counselor, followed by a meeting with a transfer credit evaluator (if necessary), and then was finally assisted by a professional advisor. This last advisor helped the student choose courses and gain familiarity with the registration process. During the student's time at SPU, no formal relationship with a faculty advisor was required; however, they did have the option to initiate this relationship on their own. The final handoff was to a degree auditor who evaluated and posted the student's degree. Unfortunately, many students were not even aware of all curriculum requirements until this graduation audit. This "hands-off" mode of operation caused many student questions and needs to go unnoticed. SPU's registrar commented, "Too many students were falling through the cracks." In combination, these problems led to employee and student dissatisfaction, contributing to a retention rate that was less than desirable. To become more effective, Student Academic Services needed to define its mission and change its structure.

Today, a student's experience is much different in large measure due to the structural changes that have taken place. First, the mission statement is now clear and concise: "*To maintain academic integrity. To support students in achieving their education goals, while serving the faculty and staff to meet the SPU Vision.*" Furthermore, students are handed off only one time from the admissions process all the way to graduation. Admissions counselors now directly connect newly admitted students to an assigned **academic counselor**. Students will then work with the same counselor throughout their entire educational experience. The services provided by the academic counselors include: transferring credits, registering students for their first classes, advising throughout all stages of matriculation, and finally, reviewing and posting students' degrees. Faculty advising is also required, including advising on major and minor requirements, but students always have their academic counselor for additional support. Today, approximately half the employees in the Student Academic Services are academic counselors. The other half of the departmental employees are registration experts who build, manage, and maintain the university catalog and time schedule as well as process grades, transcripts, and the

budget. These two groups are in constant communication and are considered one team working to fulfill the departmental mission.

Is this relatively new structure in Student Academic Services effective? Are there less students “falling through the cracks?” To answer these questions, the department periodically surveys the undergraduate student body to evaluate and ensure the services provided by the academic counselors are valued and effective. The most recent survey, conducted in 2007, suggests that students do appreciate having one counselor throughout their educational experience. Over four hundred students responded to the email survey, approximately thirteen percent of the student body. When responding to the question, “overall, is my academic counselor effective,” almost ninety percent of these students said that their academic counselor was *always, frequently, or usually effective*. This positive response from students does seem to support that the new structure is effective in helping students achieve their academic goals.

Even with a solid structure in place, there is more to a department than just goals, strategies, technology, and the environment. Evaluating structure alone will not be enough if a department is to reach its full potential. Additional windows must be considered, one of which is the human resource frame.

Organizational Theory: The Human Frame



Courtesy of http://quassan.blogspot.com/2008/05/global-empowerment-foundation-quassan_21.html

Is the department meeting the needs of its employees? This is the central question of the human resource frame. Bolman and Deal (1997) discuss two methods organizations and their departments can employ to strengthen this bond with employees: “One set of approaches strengthens the bond...by paying well, providing job security, promoting from within, training the workforce, and sharing the fruits of organizational success. Another set empowers workers and gives work more significance through participation, job enrichment, teaming, democracy, and egalitarianism” (p. 141). I call this first set of approaches *external bonds* and the second set of approaches *intrinsic bonds*.

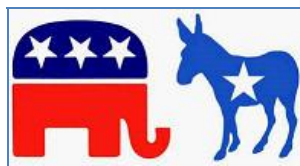
For the most part, the *external bonds* in Student Academic Services are being met. Salaries are competitive with other universities and all positions have the opportunity for advancement. Job security is high as there have been no downsizings or terminations in recent years. Furthermore, training opportunities are excellent; everyone has the opportunity to attend at least one professional development conference each year. The noteworthy challenge in this area is the rising cost of living in the Seattle metro area. Housing costs continue to increase at such a rapid pace that it is difficult to afford living within a reasonable commute of campus. Ideas to alleviate this burden have been presented by the SPU community, such as building faculty and staff housing; however, no immediate institutional plans have been implemented in

addressing this issue. In the meantime, Student Academic Services has created its own solutions. Three employees currently have a flexible schedule because they have young children at home. In addition, three other employees in the department are currently spending a significant amount of time working from home.

The other set of needs within the Human Resource Frame is *intrinsic bonds*. Technology has positively impacted this frame as *Banner*™, an integrated application database, is giving frontline employees instant access to SPU students' records. This advancement prompted the leaders in Student Academic Services to empower frontline employees, giving them permission to change class schedules, approve transfer substitutions, process special permissions, and provide other services that in the past required supervisor approval or a petition process. There are two primary benefits of this empowerment. First, front-line employees can provide more timely and more accurate service to the SPU students and faculty. And second, it intrinsically motivates employees as they participate in helping meet the needs of the students and faculty. One drawback is that the rapid pace of such service can cause minor mistakes and oversights, which are bound to happen from time to time (especially in a registration office when many details are being processed). The leaders in Student Academic Services acknowledged this reality early on and instituted a policy that "All mistakes are fixable." A few mistakes are easily compensated by the level of speed and service provided.

All in all, the human needs of the employees in Student Academic Services are being met. Evidence of this can be found in the number of people in the SPU community who apply for positions in the department. Student employees frequently apply for positions, as four out of the last five new professional hires in the office have been from within Student Academic Services. Furthermore, of the seven academic counselors currently in the department, six were either hired from within or transferred in from other departments on campus. Job openings in the Student Academic Services department are highly coveted at SPU, largely as a result of the intentional investment in the Human Frame.

Organizational Theory: The Political Frame



Courtesy of <http://www.broadcastingcable.com/articles/images/BCST/library/ElephantAndDonkey.jpg>

The political frame sometimes carries with it negative connotations. Universities and departments obviously need both effective structures and tangible methods to meet the human needs of employees, but what wisdom can be gleaned from the political frame? The reality is that politics and power struggles exist in any department or organization. Bolman and Deal (1997) outline the following political assumptions (p. 163):

1. Departments and organizations are *coalitions* of individuals and groups.
2. There are *enduring differences* among coalition members in values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality.
3. Most important decisions involve the allocation of *scarce resources*—who gets what.
4. This gives rise to *conflict*, making *power* the most important resource.

5. Thus, goals and decisions emerge from *bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position* amongst the various individuals and groups.

Many departments have a hierarchal, top-down structure where every person knows where they fall on the ladder and who makes the important decisions. This kind of dynamic can cause a wide division between those who make decisions and those who execute them, which in turn leads to dissatisfaction and mistrust among those who execute decisions. Many times, these employees will openly rebel against the leaders or decide to covertly undermine their authority, looking for a way to gain power. In contrast to this traditional structure, a different organizational model is presented in the book *Web of Inclusion* (1995), authored by Helgesen. This text describes how departments can instead have models that are “web-like,” with leaders placing themselves at the center of the department instead of at the top. The registrar at SPU has created this kind of web-like dynamic within Student Academic Services. Over the years, this leader has been “ceaselessly spinning new tendrils of connection, while also continually strengthening those that already exist...[her] tools are not force, not the ability to issue commands, but rather providing access and engaging in constant dialogue” (p. 13).

When a web-like structure is in place, the political dynamic changes; instead of decisions being made by those wielding the most *power*, these decisions can be made by those with the best *ideas*. With a leader sitting at the center of the web, the best information and ideas are available for everyone to discuss. In Student Academic Services, the registrar’s door is always open. The same open door policy is implemented by the associate and assistant registrars. Instead of individuals and coalitions jockeying for power, all employees are included in the decision making process. Many times, it is the people at the front lines who have the best ideas for solving problems. Even if their solutions are not chosen, they at least know that their ideas have been heard and respectfully considered. This kind of dialogue helps everyone to feel connected and invested in the decisions.

With this “web-like” leadership structure in Student Academic Services, ideas reign supreme. Instead of the constant bargaining and negotiating for political power, everyone is connected and included in solving problems and allocating resources. Helgesen comments, “Such centers of power may not be necessarily reflected in an [department or] organization’s management chart, but are indicative nonetheless of how work actually gets done” (p. 27). The goal of the political frame is to allocate enough power to get things done. In the Student Academic Services department, the political frame distributes this kind of power to everyone.

Organizational Theory: The Cultural Frame



Courtesy of http://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/about/images/culture_index.jpg

To return to the metaphor of the human body, if the structural frame is the bare bones of a department, then the cultural frame is the *soul*. Bolman and Deal (1997) state, “Peak performance emerges as a team discovers its soul” (p. 292). Over time, every department

develops its own distinct beliefs, language, myths, rituals, and values. Both negative and positive cultures can co-exist within a variety of departments across a college campus. The central questions in the cultural frame are:

1. What are the beliefs and values that we share?
2. How do these beliefs and values grow and take form?

In the past, Student Academic Services was known as the “academic police” of SPU. When asked a question, the department would either answer “yes” or “no.” This black and white language led to a culture that was stifling, limiting, and uncreative. For the department to effectively serve the SPU community, it needed to change.

The first step in changing this culture was to change the values. Instead of strict rules, the leaders decided to value people and customer service. The first step was to change the language from just “yes” and “no” responses to a more conversational approach that explains the “why” in decision making. In addition, the leaders wanted the department to provide the students and faculty with various options, helping them find the best possible solution to their questions. This change in language and methodology led to a different culture in Student Academic Services. No longer known as the “no” people, the department is now known as the people who can “help.” Students and professors now seek out Student Academic Services when they need assistance of any kind. This kind of change in culture did not happen suddenly. It took time to develop and was intentionally and diligently pursued. Professional development played a significant role early on in changing the departmental language, and this training is now reinforced by departmental leaders. Even the student employees are trained in responding to students, professors, and parents in a manner that is professional, helpful and promotes dialogue.

Once the department’s values became more *people* focused and less *rules* focused, these values were nurtured and reinforced through celebrations and traditions. These events, which range from thirty-minute birthday parties to all-day work retreats, include the entire office (even student employees). This encourages collaboration, team-building, playful interaction, and fun moments. Kouzes and Posner (2002) discuss how fun isn’t a luxury at work, it is essential to both quality and productivity (p. 377-378). Furthermore, these rituals provide the opportunity to celebrate achievements and reinforce the values that shape the culture. In Student Academic Services, it is this soulful culture that brings about a lifetime of committed service. Similar offices in higher education have significant turnover from year-to-year; however, in Student Academic Services at SPU, thirteen of the sixteen employees have now been employed for over five years.

Conclusion

After analyzing both the past and present effectiveness in the Student Academic Services department at SPU, it is easy to see how organizational theory and the four frames can be helpful in evaluating a department. At times, some challenges may involve several frames at once, and optimal effectiveness can only be achieved by evaluating all four frames holistically. In the Student Academic Services department, many positive changes can be contextualized by the four frames. These changes have improved and sharpened the department’s mission of helping students reach their academic goals. Recently, the registrar commented that before these

changes took place the six-year graduation rate was, at best, fifty percent. However, over the past ten years, the graduation rate has moved well beyond this percentage, peaking recently at sixty-six percent. While there is still room for improvement, it is encouraging to review and celebrate these positive changes. Many departments in higher education can benefit from reviewing their past and present effectiveness in light of the structural, human resource, political, and cultural frames. With the help of these windows, every department and university can become more effective in serving its employees and campus community.

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Courtesy Jim Kim

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