

THE POSTPANDEMIC REVITALIZATION OF A MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTION THROUGH STRUCTURAL AND OPERATIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

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Abstract

St. Augustine College, a small, bilingual higher education institution, survived the pandemic by implementing structural and operational changes. The primary objective was two-fold: to create organizational changes that addressed the consequences of an unprecedented pandemic and to create the tools and mechanisms needed to sustain those organizational changes. Despite the circumstance, the institution's commitment to its nontraditional student population, primarily female (78%) and Hispanic students (85%), motivated the necessary changes.

The theoretical framework that supports this research study is the work of Kurt Lewin (1942)'s 3-Stage Model of Change. A mixed methods study determined the framework for data collection and analysis. The newly created Office of Academic Effectiveness (OAE) was the unit of analysis. The OAE is responsible for the quality assurance of the institution. Through qualitative data including interviews and observations, the Latino Educational Model, the new foundational teaching and learning philosophy of the institution, was developed. The quantitative data that served as the model's creation was generated from four satisfaction surveys as well as students' evaluations of course and instructors.

This study provides a close examination of the office's accomplishments and failures, institutional obstructions and passageways, and the balancing of existing traditions with new best practices. As a result of an arduous reframing process intended to revitalize the traditional culture, the college community united to create new units, revamp enrollment and admission procedures, update technology for different instructional delivery modalities, hire system disruptors, design and implement new policies, enforce assessment measures, craft onboarding regulations, establish faculty evaluation guidelines, build new academic programs, restructure and reevaluate the curricula, set up academic internships, conceive new certificates, and rebrand the institution, among other initiatives. The institutionalization of these changes seems to be the catalyst that will lead the institution to reclaim its position in the higher learning community.

Keywords: *Organizational change, quality assurance, restraining forces, driving forces, reframing.*

1. Introduction

The unprecedented pandemic forced institutions of higher education to address long-standing institutional challenges that had not been prioritized before the arrival of COVID. Upper management of the institution had historically responded to challenges with a lack of urgency, at times stalling organizational changes that would have been institutional-saving practices, though likely unpopular amongst some stakeholders. However, the major changes precipitated by COVID allowed the institution to revisit those initiatives that had become stagnant. The small bilingual college located in Chicago took full advantage of the opportunity to embrace change and began implementing measures that supported the revival and survival of the institution.

1.1. Background information

Institutional lockdown in March 2020 served as a catalyst for reinvigorated discussions surrounding existing organizational structures, processes, and policies and their efficacy in light of the new remote environment. Elimination of offices, consolidation of units, layoffs of non-essential staff and faculty, creation of new departments, and renewal of existing processes were among the necessary changes driven by the pandemic. As a result of a painful reframing process intended to revitalize institutional culture, the college community united to create new units, revamp enrollment and admission procedures, update technology for different instructional delivery modalities, challenge the status quo, design and implement new policies, enforce assessment measures, craft onboarding regulations, establish faculty evaluation guidelines, build new academic programs, restructure and reevaluate the curricula, create academic internships, conceive new certificates, and rebrand the institution, among other initiatives.

One of the major changes undertaken by the institution was the elimination of the position of Vice-President of Academic Affairs. The Office of Academic Affairs and three distinct Schools were created. Academic programs with their respective associate bachelor and associate degrees were distributed within the three Schools: School of Education, the School of Healthcare and Social Sciences, and the School of STEAM. The rush to adopt new technologies, safeguard students, and support faculty through the unanticipated shift to remote instruction highlighted the institution's areas of opportunity. Forced to confront the challenges that had been magnified by the onset of the pandemic, academic quality assurance became a strategic priority. In response, the college founded the Office of Academic Effectiveness in an effort to bolster quality control within the institution. This innovative institutional move served as an attempt to reclaim academic accountability and ensure streamlined operations within academic units.

1.2. Theoretical framework

1.2.1 Reframing the college. Bolman and Deal (1999) created the four frames or lenses for explaining organizational structure. The frames invoke and influence changes in an organization. They define four frames of leadership as structural, human resources, political, and symbolic. Through analogies, Bolman and Deal stated that the structural frame operates as a factory, goal-oriented with clear directions, roles and structure, departmentalized, and with measurable outcomes. The human resource frame represents a family that focuses "on the needs of people as well as their roles, skills, interests, values, and interactions" (Black, 1999, p.16). The image of a jungle was used by Bolman and Deal (1999) to provide the analogy of the political frame. Individuals in this frame make coalitions, alliances, and negotiations to get what they would like from the organization. Finally, the carnival, represented by the symbolic frame, plays a major role in the organization as it describes the organizational culture and climate and the diversity of the entity.

Bolman and Deal (2017) outline that no frame works well in every circumstance. Consequently, a leader that bounds to one frame eventually behaves inappropriately and ineffectively. According to Bolman and Deal (2017), the reframing process increases the probability of seeing and solving "real" problems, while encouraging people to expand the scope and flexibility of their own thinking. Reframing is presented as the alternative use of the frames as organization change internally. The art of reframing empowers one to act and to learn simultaneously. To reframe, a leader takes time to find out what is happening, and, based on the data, acts. The college community has witnessed a process of reframing that continues into present day. There clearly was an unintentional invitation to reframe the institution by looking at systems and procedures from different viewpoints.

1.2.2. The force field analysis. In organizational behavior, Kurt Lewin is analogous to organizational change. In 1940, he identified two forces that all organizations experience as they undertake changes: driving momentum to a desired future state and one pushing in opposition to that goal, the restraining forces. Unfortunately, change and reform often focus on solutions without understanding the forces at play. Kurt Lewin created the Force Field Analysis model for change. It explains the relationship between driving forces for positive change and the restraining forces against change. As organizations embark on a change process, these forces must be recognized and identified in the planning, controlling, directing, and supervising the expected and desired change in the organization. The Change Theory proposed by Lewin emerged unintentionally as we examined the institution's internal processes. Resisting forces became apparent as changes were introduced and implemented. Driving and restraining forces, the freezing and unfreezing events, appeared as a natural change progression. Inevitably, restraining and driving forces were identified during this change process that either impeded necessary changes or urged changes that were necessary to institutional survival. The examination of these theories of change and reframing organizations prompted this research study.

2. Design

The research design called for a combination of qualitative and quantitative research practices. The mixed research design allowed the researchers to examine (quantitative) and explore (qualitative) data that would eventually inform institutional changes. The president's decision to create the Office of Academic Effectiveness (OAE) with the purpose of planning, organizing, developing, and directing academic quality assurance in teaching, curriculums, assessment, and reporting was one such change. The OAE also serves as experts for innovative education initiatives, design, and learning formats that address the specific learning needs of the college's unique student population. In fact, most of the organizational changes that have been implemented at the institution recently have originated within this unit and, undoubtedly, have prompted strong opposition from resisting forces.

The OAE designed this study to reevaluate its functions, structure, and opportunities for improvement. The quantitative aspect of the design calls for data collected through various forms of surveys. The qualitative aspect of the mixed research design focused on random interviews and focus

groups consisting of faculty, students, administrators, and staff members. Open-ended survey responses were also used to construct the case for institutional revitalization. The study also analyzed three academic programs through a curriculum evaluation process.

3. Objectives

There are two objectives in the study:

3.1. to examine satisfaction with new organizational changes implemented to mitigate the negative effects of an unprecedented pandemic.

3.2. to create tools and mechanisms to sustain those organizational changes in the post-pandemic environment.

4. Methods

The mixed method research design involved individuals in many different roles within the institution. Faculty, administrators, students, and staff provided data through a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling. By definition, purposeful sampling is a non-random sampling technique that utilizes a specific criteria or purpose to select particular sample. Meanwhile, a convenience sampling is the first available primary data source to be used for the research without additional requirements (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018).

4.1. The Site Description

St. Augustine College (SAC) is a federally designated private, nonprofit four-year Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) founded in 1980 in Chicago to provide low-income, bilingual Hispanic adults access to higher education. SAC was the first institution of higher education in the Midwest to deliver bilingual academic and workforce programs designed to serve low-income, underrepresented students, the majority of whom are Pell-eligible and underrepresented in institutions of higher education in Illinois. St. Augustine College has graduated over 8,000 low-income bilingual, bicultural students since 1980 and has a Carnegie classification as a Baccalaureate/Associate Mixed, private not-for-profit, 4-year institution which is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission. SAC's programs are intentionally designed to make higher education accessible to a diverse student population, with special emphasis on low-income students and students of Hispanic descent.

4.2. The sample description

4.2.1. Students. A high percentage of students, 81%, are low-income Hispanic/Latinos. One hundred percent of students are Illinois residents. SAC's most distinctive feature has always been its intense focus on delivering bilingual college-level instruction and workforce education in culturally appropriate settings. The majority of SAC students are Hispanic, first-generation, low-income women. Spanish language-dominant students have the option to begin their coursework at the college in their native language, and, by the time they graduate, students are fluent in English and Spanish. For over a decade, low-income Latinos have accounted for 84% to 87% of SAC's student body who are Spanish-language dominant working women, 65% were first-generation, and 76% had \$0 Pell household contribution status.

4.2.2. Resident and adjunct faculty. There are 12 resident (full-time) faculty and 78 adjunct faculty members representing the three schools and their respective academic programs. Full-time ethnically diverse faculty are comprised of 65% females and 35% males whose ages range from 45 to 67 years old, with master and doctoral degrees.

4.3. Data collection procedures

Quantitative data was collected at the end of 2020 (Fall) and the beginning of 2021 (Spring). By utilizing EvaluationKit software, four surveys were built and sent to faculty, staff, and students. They were given two weeks to complete their corresponding instrument. All surveys asked for participants to rate their levels of satisfaction with various aspects of organizational culture and climate.

4.3.1. The measurement instruments. The four instruments went through two validity processes. Understanding that validity is the extent to which a test measures what it claims to measure, after forming a team of experts, the surveys were examined and the content validity was determined (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). The items on all tests represented the entire range of possible items the test should cover. Most items (85%) were drawn from previous satisfaction surveys, though some items were reworded, changed, eliminated, and/or created given. Beginning in 2020, the institution underwent many technological, personnel, procedural, and cultural changes. The institution purchased the EvaluationKit software platform that facilitates the creation of digital surveys and provides automatic calculation of

descriptive statistics with easy report generation. To ensure content validity, experts recommended the elimination of items that were obsolete and inadequate for the new emerging institution after COVID. The majority of the items were reworded and personalized to better capture the personal perceptions and views of each respondent. The newly created items were primarily related to the use of technology in the classroom, the remote delivery system, online assessments, the virtual classroom, and onboarding process. Each of the surveys ended up with a fewer number of items than the original surveys.

4.3.2. Survey description. The Resident Faculty Satisfaction Survey has 27 items with and utilizes different measurement scales. Those intended to measure satisfaction used Likert scales and the other items were measured by checklist, yes/no, and multiple-choice questions. The Adjunct Faculty Satisfaction Survey has 28 items with 10 sections. Similar to the resident survey, the adjunct survey uses different measurement scales. About 75% of questions in the survey are similar to the Resident Faculty Satisfaction Survey excluding those items that are specific to full-time faculty such as benefits, recognition of institutional service, and research activities. The Staff Climate Survey was designed to elicit feedback from all staff about not only their satisfaction with college practices but also with shared governance, diversity and inclusion, values and beliefs, salary, benefits, and other elements of work at the College. The 23-item Student Satisfaction Survey asked students to rate their satisfaction with different administrative and academic units on and off campus.

5. Discussion

The analysis and discussion of the results are aligned with the objectives of the study. Organizational changes implied reframing situations to provide different solutions to persistent challenges affecting the institution.

Objective 1: *to examine satisfaction with new organizational changes implemented to mitigate the negative effects of an unprecedented pandemic.*

Surveying faculty, staff, and students and learning their satisfaction level with many aspects of their daily roles and functions determined that the overall level of satisfaction has a mean of $X=2.92$ and $SD=0.62$. Using descriptive data alone, strong statistical arguments cannot be drawn from the data. It can be said that, generally speaking, resident faculty are somewhat satisfied with the institutional changes that occurred due to the pandemic. Among all 29 items, salary seems to be the area in which faculty are most dissatisfied, followed by research opportunities, tutoring services, benefits, and committee load. The most satisfying factors were CANVAS (learning management system) and the SAC laptop loan program. The mean of both were over 3.5 and the standard deviations showed homogeneity of responses given by respondents. With an overall mean $X=3.34$ and a $SD=0.78$, adjunct faculty expressed higher level of satisfaction than resident faculty on similar institutional issues. Again, compensation per course ($X=2.39$, $SD=.8$) was the area in which most adjunct faculty were most dissatisfied. Opportunities for professional development, teaching load, library services, and digital books also scored below 3.5, but not less than 3.0. It seems that adjunct faculty are relatively satisfied with the services and opportunities that the college offers. The overall satisfaction of the college staff (including administrative personnel, lower level administrators, and technicians) was rated with a mean of 3.15 and $SD=0.73$. For example, retirement benefits represent the lowest level of satisfaction among all questions posed on the survey. On the other hand, relationship with supervisor(s) has the highest level of satisfaction with a $X=3.59$ and $SD=0.57$. The SD evidenced the homogeneous responses given by the respondents.

Student satisfaction is of primary importance for any higher education institution. Despite concerns with the subjectivity of student evaluations, they have been used as an evaluation of students' overall experience with academics, services, facilities, and administration at the institution. Student Satisfaction with the college, has a mean equal to 3.69 and a standard deviation equal to 0.69. The responses were homogeneous. It seems that students are satisfied with the college in general. Upon closer inspection, the item "instructors encourage students to succeed" has a mean equal to 3.54 being the highest, whereas item "my learning facilitator gave ideas on how to succeed academically" has the lowest mean (3.31). The Learning Facilitator is a new position that evolved from the traditional advising model used in the past.

Additional qualitative data was collected from the curriculum evaluations conducted in three academic programs. The curriculum evaluations identified areas of expansion, need for curriculum modernization and re-sequencing, and necessary changes in leadership organization. Although recommendations from each curriculum evaluation have been met with some resistance and implementation has been slow, faculty teaching in those programs have acknowledged the importance of making changes in order to improve enrollment and academic quality.

Objective 2: *to create tools and mechanisms to sustain those organizational changes into the post-pandemic environment.*

Organizational changes were planned, designed, and progressively institutionalized regardless of the restraining forces impeding the implementation. Many changes were able to be achieved due to the driving forces that made them happen. Many of those changes were institutionalized between 2020 and 2021. Drastic measures of personnel and staff reductions, faculty contract reconsideration, elimination of number of course offered, cancellations of courses, eligibility criteria for student awards, among other reforms continue to be enforced at the college level.

6. Conclusions

The process of reframing the college has taken time. In the analysis of the organizational frames, the two most relevant frames identified were political and symbolic. Bolman and Deal's (2017) political frame sees organizations as jungles in which leaders must govern politics and organize power. Constant conflict among members has emerged as an inherent component of the organization as time and resources are limited. The political frame is made up of individuals with several different and opposing beliefs, interests, and perceptions of the group and its current circumstances. The political frame is observable in several areas at the college. For example, lack of resources is a constant threat to employment stability. Faculty contracts, regardless of academic rank, are signed yearly, making academic life very unstable. Questionable ethical decisions regarding faculty teaching load and preferential awarding of courses is noted within the institution. Conflicts are present between offices due to overlapping responsibilities and/or functions, and the absence of an institutional organizational chart reinforces the deficit of clear reporting lines and the functions and roles of each unit of operation.

On the other hand, the symbolic frame is a foundational resource for all organizations that focuses on vision and inspiration. The organizational culture created by values, beliefs, traditions, norms, and customs of a shared background support the organizational vision. Organizational culture and climate are shaped by leaders who use myths and metaphors, stories and tales, and rituals and ceremonies to symbolically inspire followers in organizations to get things done. In this regard, the institution is clearly governed by culture and traditions.

The reframing process being introduced through structural and human resources frames is systematically triggering the need for balance between the four frames, the ideal situation as stated by Bolman and Deal (1991). Clear policies (i.e., Faculty Handbook), goal-orientation (i.e., mission statement revision), infusion of technology (i.e., zoom platform, CANVAS learning management system), and other structural elements have assisted in the structural reframing. The institution has also witnessed reframing through the use of the human resources frame in many daily institutional activities. The full adoption and implementation of the four frames would allow what is known as balanced leadership. The college is heading in that direction. We are aware of the complex challenges at hand. The organizational changes required to build an institutional culture of continuous assessment and academic quality is not possible within a one-year period, as this case study illustrates. While progress has been made, the OAE has faced multiple setbacks that have hindered progress. After the introduction of new policies and processes, it became apparent that the institution lacks articulated approval processes, leading to long delays in the review, collaborative feedback process, and ultimate approval of new initiatives. Additionally, without institutional precedence of regular assessment and critical evaluation of academic programs and policies, buy-in to quality assurance processes has been sluggish, with few resources allocated to assist in OAE endeavors. Lastly, unforeseen obstacles such as a lack of urgency perception have prevented many initiatives from being implemented by the time of publication. A culture of administrative paralysis for new policies and processes permeates decision-making at the institution. Time and buy-in from all stakeholders will be critical to the success of proposed initiatives in the coming months and years.

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