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The “Many Faces” and Complexities of Continuing Education units within today’s Higher Education Organizations: An Empirical Study

Sandria Stephenson

Abstract: A qualitative methodology was used to identify higher education leaders’ understanding of continuing education units’ organization and program development. Using various metaphors, the study reveals that the way administrators conceptualize their units symbolically often determine their administrative strategies relative to organizational development and program planning issues within their parent organization.

Background and Purpose of the Study

Regardless of the growing responsibilities for continuing education units, they are still often regarded as “simply marketing” arenas for higher education institutions (Bok, 2003; Breneman, 2005). Yet continuing education is constantly in an organizational architecture mode where the structures, systems, and resources are being translated into strategies, programs, activities, tasks, and ultimately into people’s competencies, capabilities, and attitudes. Serving as corroborator and catalyst, linking needs to stakeholders and programs, yet doing so within their traditional setting, is the crucial “story” of continuing higher education. Hence, inquiries related to the reevaluation of the historical mission and value of continuing higher education, in the changing political-economic climate of higher education, are necessary. This study examined how university administrators conceptualize their continuing education units’ organizational dynamics, and model elements in such unconventional settings. Specifically,

(1) How do university administrators identify their role, responsibilities, and connections to continuing education?

(2) How do these administrators metaphorically categorize the organizational structure of the continuing education units within these universities?

(3) How do these metaphorical frameworks relate to program planning and development?

Theoretical Framework

Higher education history shows that universities play a very important role in the education and development of human beings, both socially and economically and also that the history of continuing education is inexorably linked to the history of higher education (Gessner, 1987). However, while it is also a concern that universities are [might be] losing their historic mission (Bok, 2003; Shapiro, 2005), continuing educators proffer that higher education leverage continuing education when offering higher education benefits to the society at large (Breneman, 2005; Edelson, 2006; Offerman, 2002). Continuing higher education, once considered on the periphery of higher education’s academic activities, is becoming main-stream, an important component of the main academic activities within many high caliber universities (Donaldson, 1991; Gessner, 1987; UCEA, 2006a). However, there is not one defined template of organizational structure that defines continuing education in general.

Drawing on social and cultural anthropology, Bolman and Deal (2003) espoused a four-frame model to “make sense of organizations” (p. 12). One part of the four-frame model is the
symbolic frame. The symbolic frame tends to abandon rationality and views organizations as cultures, stories, and myths. Hence, the way in which administrators conceptualize and express assumptions about their units’ organizational structure in the higher educational realm is symbolic of various model prototypes that, reasonably, can be configured as having a humanistic, mechanistic (bureaucratic), or procedural design (Hodge, Anthony, & Gales, 1996). These frameworks will offer a postmodern, symbolic interpretive ontology in its approach to program planning (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006). While the goals of continuing education program planning are diverse, the primary goal is to promote the mission of its parent university. Program planning and development is the single most important decision making process in which continuing educators engage on a daily basis (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Dickeson, 1999; Edelson, 2006) and involves important issues such as themes and objectives, program format, budgeting, faculty, and fit of the program within the larger university’s mission (Cafferella, 2002; Cervero & Wilson, 1994, 2006; Edelson, 2006).

**Research Design**

The study used a qualitative methodology to examine respondents’ experiences and perceptions of continuing education within eight major traditional universities, four private and four public. Qualitative research is the concept that seeks to interpret peoples’ construction of reality and to identify patterns in their perspectives. The rational for choosing this methodology was the need to evoke meaning from these administrators who served as the units’ informants (Merriam & Simpson, 2000; Patton, 2002). These respondents were higher education administrators with titles such as (Vice Provosts, Provosts, Vice Chancellors, and Deans) who had direct responsibilities for or connections to continuing education. They were selected based on various criteria including their titles, knowledge about, and responsibility or connection to the continuing education units, and the length of time in the role. In addition, criteria for the units were that they represent a key division within a major university and must offer credit and noncredit programs for nontraditional learners. The units were selected based on geographical locations, representing four of the six geographical categorizations as outlined by the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA, 2006b). These geographical locations are Mid-Atlantic, South, Great Plains, and Mid-America.

Seventeen semi-structured interviews, that were tape recorded and later transcribed, along with institutional documents provided by the informants served as the data. The data were analyzed using an overarching constant comparative analysis; the interviews were analyzed inductively, while the documents were analyzed using qualitative document analysis. This open coding process was use to identify the concepts and to develop the patterns and themes. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), open coding is “the analytical process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (p. 101). Subsequent to the open coding process, an axial coding process was used for creating the summaries, major categories and, subcategories.

**Findings**

For purposes of research anonymity these eight universities’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms portraying the region and the institutions typology, whether public or private. The pseudonyms are as follows: Mid-Atlantic Public, South Public, Great Plains Public, Mid-America Public, Mid-Atlantic Private, South Private, Great Plains Private, and Mid-America
The study reveals that continuing education is a ubiquitous feature in every sphere of post-secondary education, yet various kinds of organizational configurations prevail. Nevertheless, its organizational dynamics can be construed metaphorically (Edelson, 2006) or symbolically (Bolman & Deal, 1994, 2003). The way in which administrators conceptualize and express assumptions about their units’ organizational structure in the higher educational realm is symbolic of various model prototypes that, reasonably, can be configured as having a humanistic, mechanistic (bureaucratic), or procedural design (Hodge, Anthony, & Gales, 1996). The following paragraphs summarize the institutions, and symbolic models and frames and where appropriate, informants’ quotes are included for emphasis or further explanation.

**Overview of Institutions Symbolic Frames**

*The humanistic constructs.* This construct sees continuing education as mediating or facilitating, where it places continuing education at the interface of the larger, external community; providing efficient and effective services to students who use continuing education as a means of access to the university. Two institutions, it seems, fit this construct they are Mid-Atlantic Public and Mid-Atlantic Private. However, the specific models were mediator and facilitator respectively. The informants at Mid-Atlantic Public admitted that structurally, continuing education is *non-authoritative* with regards to academic program offerings, but is administratively. With respect to the organizational structure, the Associate Vice President for Outreach stated, “Ok, so organizationally, I guess I would say we are a centralized organization and all those units report up to me and I report up to the Vice President for Outreach.” The Associate Director for Continuing education alleged, “Continuing education is set up as a centralized administrative function; we work with all the academic units to extend their programs off campus so we are a centralized administrative unit.” Degree programs are “offered” through the various academic departments, schools, and colleges; the academic units offering the programs have full academic authority, hence the continuing education unit’s *mediator* role. For Mid-Atlantic Private University, the School of Continuing Education is technically one central ‘freestanding’ unit, and is expected to be entirely self-supporting. In responding to the question regarding the structure and organization of the continuing education unit, the Dean responded as follows, “Essentially I am an academic dean of a free-standing school we have our own faculty part-time, and our own curriculum…” “I not sure what terms you want me to use, but ‘free standing’ is the way we would describe it.” This school of continuing studies is in a *facilitator role* in that it supports the university summer program, in addition to being a self-supporting, centralized unit with its own programs and faculty. However, it can also be surmised that it is trying to secure political and economic autonomy so that it can chart its own destiny, hoping to achieve true independence and equality. Not quite [the] overarching *humanistic frame*.

*The procedural constructs.* This construct shows continuing education as having a hybrid or educational-laboratory model, it allows for new program concept development which is subsequently supplemented by an academic department; it often plays a greater role in administration of parent academic programs. Three institutions fit this construct; they are Great-Plains Public, Mid-America Public, and South Private. From this Great Plains Public university example, it can be deduced that continuing education resembles other administrative units that *interplay with the academic subsystems*, notably colleges and schools within the university system. However, there is an important difference, and that is, continuing education plays a greater role in developing, administering, and evaluating a variety of academic credit and noncredit programs even to the point of administering the entire summer semester for the parent
university. Hence, it is neither “centralized nor decentralized.” This “hybrid” model as, described and noted by the Provost is situated within a *procedural framework*. The Vice Provost for Mid America stated that, “CE is, one of the, well, is the fastest growing part of the whole extension function in the state...we reach over 160K individuals each year through CE. So in that respect, it’s making a great contribution to the educational mission of the university to serve people beyond the campus.” As an organization CE is academically decentralized within the schools and colleges; as each offers a different level of participation in such programs; however, there is a central office which is administratively responsible for all continuing education activities on the campus. Hence, continuing education at this university is viewed somewhat similar to an *educational laboratory* model with a *procedural framework*. It is a place where new programs and innovations are launched and through which university resources extend beyond boundaries of the state. For South Private University continuing education also resembles an *educational laboratory* with a *procedural framework*. In responding to the question regarding this organization of continuing education, the Provost describes continuing education as follows, “We have multiple sites of CE throughout [this state]. Some other schools do, but not to the extent of CE.” Within the school of continuing education, there are many opportunities to engage in new and innovative strategies and, because of its diversity, and multiplicity, continuing education within this institution is also seen as a unit engaged in opportunities for research and development within the lifelong learning arena.

*The mechanistic construct.* This construct views continuing education as somewhat *laminated* or *egalitarian* by definition, radical in its imagery. It is about advocating for the adult learner as a utopian mission to the recasting of society and its basic ideologies. In the colonial sense, the unit is seeking to achieve some integration and acceptance within an affluent cultural setting. Three institutions were construed has symbolically displaying the *mechanistic frame*. At South Public University the lines of demarcations between credit and noncredit programs are prevalent and obvious within this setting. When asked about the structure of the unit the Associate Vice Chancellor replied passionately, “Credit programs, summer programs, and lifelong education [are] now centralized, after July 1st, (2007) we will be moving to decentralized. These programs (the credit and summer) will be run by the individual colleges....hopefully it will work...not sure if this is good, bad, or right or wrong only time will tell.” The perceived lack of control and disorganization creates a *symbolic mélange* that warrants improvising so that efficient and effective service can be provided to students who use continuing education as a means of access to this university. The School of Professional Studies is one of three major academic units of the Great Plains Private University. The Associate Dean in responding to her connections and responsibilities to continuing education said, “The whole function of distance education is academic and that’s pretty important even though people think it’s an add-on, it’s not an add-on, it’s an integral part of what we all do.” It offers graduate and undergraduate degrees, certificates, as well as professional, and other noncredit programs via three academic units. What is important to note about continuing education at this school, is its historical development from an auxiliary-service-oriented unit to one that is currently academic and highly regarded. This school is organized as a unit with its own faculty and academic policy, procedures, and structure. In responding to the question about structure the Vice President for Professional Studies described the unit in this manner, “It’s a relatively autonomous administrative and academic unit of the university which is somewhat unique among not-for-profit universities. He asserts, “We are not like most continuing education programs, most of our programs are for credit and for degrees or certificates... for younger adults and older adults.” Thus
continuing education at this institution is somewhat radical or egalitarian by definition or in its imagery. The Associate Provost at Mid-America Private notes that “continuing education at this university is demarcated in two different structures and programs: there is an evening program that is entirely noncredit, it is dynamic and expansive. Then there is a credit segment that offers bachelors’ degrees to adults.” “Organizationally, the unit is under the Dean of the School of Education and Professional Studies. It is autonomous in its operational activities, a relatively small operation yet very complex in its organizational structure,” he continued:

I would say it is, boy, that’s a great question, it is amorphous. The university as a whole is centralized and although….the Director can do “some” programmatic and entrepreneurial things, she is limited by what the university can give her before she does that. And there is probably more subtle oversight than intentional oversight. And so that kind of a cachet oversight doesn’t give you a lot of direction, it really is kind of a cloud.

From the above quotes, it seems that continuing education is in a colonial setting within this university and the frame is very mechanistic.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Six models of continuing education within three structural frameworks are presented as the findings reveal an allegorical picture of these different models of continuing education organizations within eight universities and throughout four representative regions of the United States. These models and respective frameworks can be categorized under the umbrellas of the three designs, alluded to as: [humanistic] mediator and facilitator; [procedural] hybrid and educational-laboratory; [mechanistic] radical and colonial. Consequently, the study concludes that the participating continuing education units highlighted are not representative of all the units’ metaphorical or symbolic models that could possibly exist, whether structurally, academically, or otherwise. Implicitly for continuing education practice it is obvious from this study that there is no one “model type” of continuing education structure that fits a standard continuing education unit or one typology that is known to be normative or transferable to any other setting. For this reason, any benchmarking of organizational structures cannot be decisive and should only be used for comparative assessments. From a theoretical perspective, the study disagrees with some of the literature in higher education and concludes that not all continuing education units are “simply marketing” arenas for higher education institutions as often portrayed in the literature (Bok, 2003; Breneman, 2005). They are; however, key elements in alternative organizational approaches and in strategic planning when thinking about program development and implementation for nontraditional or adult learners. Hence, the modes by which administrators symbolically conceptualize their units often determine their administrative strategies relative to program planning, and development, as well as relational issues within their parent organization.

As an implication for higher education, the study affirms that continuing education organizations serve as alternative means of access to higher education for adult and other nontraditional learners. However, continuing education can be relegated as an “organization within an organization,” where power, politics, policy, and cultural constructs affect its organizational structure and program planning and where traditional higher educational constructs and culture in-turn determine its structure, programs, and strategies. Hence, it is imperative to keep these various, symbolic organizational models in mind as a prelude to understanding how university administrators conceptualize the socio-political and socio-
economic dynamics of their continuing education units within the context of a larger university setting.

References


