**The Department 2.0: Reimagining Academic Departments for the 21st Century**

Don Chu, Ph.D.

donchuphd@gmail.com

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*` The grocery shelves in Moscow, Stalingrad and all of the Soviet Union were stocked full with vodka but there were few potatoes to be found. The centralized planning commission of the Communist Secretariat had decreed that production of vodka would be prioritized even if it meant that potato supplies were to be allocated for alcohol production rather than for basic consumption. Regional grocery store managers had no authority to decide what would be purchased with their meager resources, budgets that had stagnated as inflation had eaten away at the buying power of the ruble. When local managers were able to locate the most needed foodstuffs they made sure that the central planners knew nothing of what was really happening, and over the post-war decades the gap between central directives and the needs of the people continued to grow until it reached intolerable levels*. *The people were starving.*

While at first glance there may appear to be little resemblance between Soviet style management and typical American college governance, there are too many parallels to ignore. In both, central managers control most every aspect of budgets and planning, while local managers, those closest to the needs of “the people” officially have little real authority to use resources where they are most needed. In the age of the internet, social media and global competition, ponderous Soviet style bureaucracy and micro-management has proven itself to be a failure in the face of rapid change and global competition. Clearly the modus operandi at 21st century American colleges and universities needs to change.

That’s why this article as well as the follow-up articles that will appear in *The Department Chair* will be written—to assist educational leaders to reimagine academic departments and how they are managed in the 21st century.

Where we are and how we got here: Bureaucracy and siloes

At the turn of the 20th century American schools were small in size with most having fewer than a hundred faculty. In 1911 Frederick Taylor’s “Principles of Scientific Management” were devised to manage assembly line labor. Taylor’s principles were applied to American colleges which were then broken-up into specialized silos called “departments” that were governed through bureaucratic hierarchy. University policies were written that recognized the faculty’s rights of academic freedom and that established faculty as the final arbiters of curriculum, while Presidents, VPs and deans monopolized bureaucratic authority over budget and other business matters. Between administration’s power over bureaucratic management structures on the one hand, and the faculty’s power over the means of production (i.e. curriculum, teaching) on the other hand, an “academic détente” developed. While both theoretically had the power to make changes in their spheres of influence, neither was willing to do so without the support of the other. While political stability ensued, the result has been a resistance to change.

Critics of 20th century university management have pointed at a number of factors that lead to a glacial pace of change in American higher education. These include the siloed nature of departments and faculty, the multiplicity of curricular decision makers all of whom have a virtual veto, the perceived need of public institutions that depend upon tax-payer money and tuition driven private institutions that depend upon positive publicity for enrollments and contributions, severely limited financial authority for middle and department level managers that leaves picayune resources available for initiatives at the program level, the high-turnover rate and paucity of chair preparation that makes long-term progress problematic.

In the 19th century, top down management worked fine in the age of water and steam power but not in 21st century cloud based world. Today, creativity, teamwork and agility win. Organizations that adapt best to accelerated change will be the ones best positioned to survive and perhaps even thrive. At one level think BYU-Idaho and Southern New Hampshire University. At another level think Stanford.

Is change a comin’?

In the last 40 years the world has changed a great deal. In 1978 the Dow peaked at 831. A new 3 bedroom home was $54,800. Gas was 63 cents a gallon and Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin signed the “Framework for Peace” at Camp David. Slide rules were the engineer’s primary computing tool and an“Introduction to Psychology” text cost $20. Within that same timeframe, however, the following has not changed in American colleges. New academic degree proposals can take three or more years for approval and implementation. “Gen Ed” remains primarily “Western Civ.” Most campuses are un/underused for 25%-33% of the year. Despite China’s global influence, and the global preeminence of Mandarin, Chinese language and culture programs are rarer on campuses than Italian. Faculty workload is still based on “contact hours” and student credits are based upon “seat time.” And oh, by the way, that “Introduction to Psychology” textbook costs about $160 today.

Management’s modus operandi in American higher educations is the same as it has for over 100 years. Fiscal and legal authority is concentrated at the top, while academic freedom, political muscle, and curricular authority reside in the faculty. American higher education is mired in “Academic management 1.0” with any Soviet-style bureaucratic directive for change running head-long into the proletariat faculty who can go about their everyday business buffered from change by academic freedom, senates, unions, administration’s aversion to bad press and the knowledge that tenure means that faculty can outlast most any administration or politician.

“Free the department!” The key to change higher education

So what is the key to bringing American higher education into the 21st century? Harness the faculty’s entrepreneurial spirit, talent and passion and couple it with management and authority centered in departments. Led by the chair and the faculty-administrative leadership team, departments will be primarily responsible to set and reach their goals, as well as manage their own resources and professional development. Why at the department? Because it is at the department level where fiscal authority from above, meets with faculty talents, responsibility and rights. Because the rubber meets the road in departments—where students are educated, where ideas originate, and where faculty teams can transform the lives of students, the life of the campus and the life of the academy. It’s where faculty leaders and chairs know what is needed and where investments need to be made. They know where money can be saved and where opportunities are in the environment. Reimagining departments so that they are transformed into 2.0 academic departments is the key to higher education’s transformation. Success in a rapidly changing higher educational environment depends upon the talent, training and experience of faculty in department units, whose size, agility and commitment to mission allows them to seize opportunities and to position themselves for the future. 2.0 departments can be the dynamic engines of 21st century colleges and universities. Good departments enhance faculty achievements, student learning the professional contributions to the college and university, and position the department for the future. Great departments can elevate an entire institution. Think veterinary science and viticulture at the University of California Davis. Think architecture at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. And when faculty in great departments catalyze breakthroughs they can transform the world. Think electrical engineering and computer science at Stanford.

What are 2.0 departments ?

The goal is to develop 2.0 departments. What are 2.0 departments? They are exciting places to learn and work because the talent and passion and energy Sof faculty are felt in the classroom, labs and even the office halls. The strongest departments are composed of faculty who are thought leaders and their faculty are independent productive engines. 2.0 departments are highly regarded on their campuses. Because they are responsible for reaching goals and managing their resources they are recognized as responsible citizens. Their faculty are respected as scholars, professionals and for their preparation of students. 2.0 departments can ride out budget swings because they have money independent of state and campus appropriations and they know where they can trim in tough financial times. 2.0 departments carefully prune their expenditures and course schedule thereby maximizing the efficiency of production and the drain on personnel budgets. They can adjust to enrollment fluctuations because they have curriculum and courses that are in high demand by their majors, majors from other departments, and by undergraduates fulfilling their general education requirements. 2.0 departments professionally develops faculty of all ranks and their graduates are coveted for jobs and graduate school. Strong departments consistently develop faculty for leadership positions, and their faculty are influential at college, campus and national levels. Strong departments will thrive in the future due to their political and fiscal positions, their curricular agility and strong values. 2.0 departments are characterized by leadership that looks for opportunities that match up faculty talent with needs of their constituents. Leaders build teams and support them with resources including time, money and talent to get the job done. 2.0 places attract talent who want to work there.

The next question is how are 2.0 departments developed?

Follow-up articles in this series: Developing 2.0 departments

In the series of articles to follow in *The Department Chair Newsletter*, the “how to” develop 2.0 academic departments will be presented. Among topics to be discussed will be the following—

-The benefits of 2.0 departments vs. traditionally managed departments

-Development of the 2.0 planning and implementation team

-Planning data and training that chairs and faculty will need

-Working with the dean and the administrative staff

-Factors that need to be considered: goal setting within the institutional mission, return on investment, budgeting, gaining authorization, incentives, return on investment, risks and rewards, timeline for action

Evaluation of progress and planning.