Dark Matters: On-line Education and Organizational Dynamics

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Sensemaking is part of the organizational dynamics influencing universities' decisions to offer on-line learning. Sensemaking and tacit assumptions result in retrograde clarification about decisions to offer distance-learning. Factors influencing this sensemaking include market pressure, disregard of strategy, unclear mission, ill-defined vision and a lack of valid data. When faculty members can calibrate the degree of alignment among their institution's mission, vision and strategy with the decision to offer on-line academics, they can reshape their roles to have a stronger voice in influencing the sensemaking and organizational dynamics that drive decisions about on-line academics.

INTRODUCTION

According to NASA, dark matter and dark energy comprise approximately 25% and 70% (respectively) of our universe. That which we know as our material world accounts for only 5% of the entire universe. Dark matter is defined in terms of what is not, rather than what it is. From a cosmological perspective, dark matter is known by what is not seen through telescopes. Some astronomers posit that dark matter "may not be made up of the matter we are familiar with at all." (Bernoskie, 2012). Similarly, within higher education, faculty and administrators alike do not or are unaware of the processes that influence decisions, strategies and program offerings. The confluence of numerous organizational elements creates dynamics that are not always readily observable yet nonetheless shape institutional outcomes. Broadly speaking, the study of the interplay of people, policies and practices with an organization is referred to as organizational behavior. A more specific subset of organizational behavior—organizational dynamics—looks at the linkage between patterns of behavior with an organization as they relate to the organization's strategy. Organizational dynamics, as defined by Stacey, (2007) encompass

> the patterns of movement over time in then interactions between the people who are the organization, the community of practice. Such patterns could be described, for example, as regular patterns of dependence and conformity, or as irregular patterns of aggression and noncompliance. (p. 3)

How do these difficult -to-observe organizational dynamics in higher education impact the fundamental decision to offer on-line academics? Understanding the sensemaking process that is an element of organizational dynamics sheds light on understanding administrators' decisions to engage in on-line academics. The sensemaking process reveals how aligned (or misaligned) an institution's mission, vision and strategy are with the push toward on-line academics. Sensemaking about distance-learning also illuminates patterns of conformity and dependence in the relationship between administration and faculty

as a part of organizational dynamics. Once revealed, these organizational dynamics can inform how faculty ought to influence an institution's sensemaking process regarding the decision to offer on-line academics.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The true challenge of on-line academics is not the debate about pedagogy, technology and changing with the times. Rather, the core challenge of on-line academics is hidden in the organizational dynamics of higher education institutions. These dynamics are reflected in the tacit assumptions held by university administrators and faculty alike. Organizational dynamics set into motion strategic or shotgun forays into a range of issues at any given time. Tacit assumptions are part of the sensemaking process—ways to understand or make sense out of things. Karl Weick (1995) explains that an essential element of sensemaking

> is that human situations are progressively clarified, but this clarification often works in reverse. It is less often the case that an outcome fulfills some prior definition of the situation, and more often the case that an outcome *develops* that prior definition. (p. 11)

In other words, the solution is identified before the problem or situation is fully analyzed and weighed. This is retrograde clarification. It follows that sensemaking processes clarify (after the fact) where a university stands on the advantages in offering distance-learning. There may be little or no connection between on-line learning and a university's defined strategy. In terms of distance-learning, the sensemaking mix includes technology, shrinking student populations and marketplace pressures for institutions of higher education to stay in business. When universities ignore or abandon strategy in making critical decisions, it is part of their unique sensemaking process. All too easily, sensemaking's retrograde clarification can morph into an escalation of commitment to tacit decisions. These unarticulated, tacit decisions are part of organizational dynamics.

The degree to which university administrators use their institutions' strategies as a compass to direct their decision-making process is a critical measure of consistency and sound business practices. It reflects the movement pattern of interactions (Stacey, 2007) or its organizational dynamics. For example, as administrators feel pressure to increase enrollment rates, they will look for a solution (on-line education) as a means of attracting more students. However, the "solution" is a response to an immediate environmental press and often is not weighed against the institution's mission—the university's prior definition of itself; what it is; what it stands for and the direction in which it should go. Some might argue that if enrollment drops too low there will be dire financial consequences, so any efforts to shore up enrollment make sense. But in the larger picture, ought not a university's mission be taken into consideration in the decision-making process? Similarly, strategic planning should also be weighed. Forecasts of changing demographics with a shrinking pool of potential traditional students and an increase in non-traditional students aged 25 years and older (Noel-Levitz, 2001) has heralded an increase in competition for different potential students. The degree to which 1) administration and faculty agree to the mission and a strategic plan of action for their institutions and 2) work that plan, is reflective of the dark matters related to leadership, business acumen and shared governance in higher education. Sadly, absent a revised mission and strategy for a university, taking action to offer distance-learning may be less of a strategic decision and more of a life-preserver. As stated in by Van Der Werf and Sabatier (2009) in Chronicle Research Services:

> The rest of colleges—regional public universities, small liberal arts colleges, and private universities without national followings—can expect to compete for students based on price, convenience, and the perceived strengths of the institutions. They will need to constantly ask themselves "What is college?" and be constantly rethinking the answer if they want students to attend. (p. 6)

The nature of the relationship between faculty and administration is the nexus for understanding organizational dynamics in higher education. When an institution takes action and decides to offer distance-learning, what is actually at play in that decision-making process? The Abilene Paradox (Harvey, 1974) details the dynamics that drive a group's collective decision to take action that is a clear contradiction to the group members' actual desires and outcomes. Harvey's framework for analyzing the dynamics of individuals in groups is centered on their inability to manage agreement. So the Abilene Paradox sheds light on a specific aspect range of organizational dynamics; it speaks to the link between taking action and anxiety. By explaining that "the reasons organization members take actions in contradiction to their understanding of the organization's problems lies in the intense anxiety that is created as they think about acting in accordance with what they believe needs to be done." (Harvey, p. 70.) It would seem that administrators' decisions to offer on-line education fall into the "action anxiety" (p.70) that Harvey describes. Administrators believe that their institutions should commit to distance-learning, yet the sensemaking assumptions shaping these decisions to offering on-line education in the university setting are examples of retrograde clarification in action. Consider the possibility that administrative decisions to enter the distance-learning arena often 1) exclude faculty as key stakeholders; 2) lack sound business practices such as market research, feasibility studies, ROI analyses, competency assessments of requisites skill sets and 3) are only loosely connected to long-term strategic focus. The retrograde clarification of sensemaking becomes a substitute for full-throated dialogue between administration and faculty. It is this substitution of assumptions for action that is actually at the heart of the on-line academics debate and serves as a snapshot of the organizational dynamics at play in universities.

These organizational dynamics reveal a fundamental shift away from the traditionally framed and interdependent roles of administrators-faculty-students to an emerging, yet-to-be-defined role configuration. For example, within academe, faculty traditionally "owns" curricula. Administrators initiate or drive strategic planning processes. Students apply to schools, are accepted and then conform in some manner to the course offerings at a university to complete required courses, maintain acceptable GPAs and graduate with a degree in their chosen fields. Contrast this with sensemaking assertions from university administrators (with a solution in mind) that curricula ownership belongs to the university and not the faculty and students who want distance-learning. Depending on a university's demographics, along with its capability to accurately survey and interpret students' preferred learning delivery methods in light of the university's strategy and mission, distance-learning may be a wise and congruent choice, albeit slightly behind the curve, given technological advances. Thus, the decision to go on-line is made. In reality, the actual decision was made when for-profit on-line colleges and universities read the writing on the wall years ago, creating and implementing business plans to capture "new" students. The role shifts are evident and insidious—weakened faculty voice in academic issues; students as a monolithic block; and administrators focus on the bottom line at the potential expense of academic quality and student satisfaction. But the overarching message is that distance-learning is a good thing for the university. This may be true, but only if the patterns of interaction—in this case developing and creating a shared mission, vision and strategy—radically shift to the future tense. At this point, universities ought to be considering mobile devices to deliver course content and building virtual learning communities.

Clearly, a mix of delivery systems that promote student learning can be appropriate and necessary goals for higher education institutions—depending on key factors. Is distance-learning a fit with the organization's missions and vision? Is there a learning management system in place with sufficient capacity for projected growth? Is IT staffed to provide technical and instructional design support? Have the requisite skills sets for on-line course design, delivery and assessment been identified? If the heart of the sense-making process is retrograde clarification (making meaning after the fact) then how much consideration will have been given to preparing faculty to be successful on-line educators? Walker and Fraser (2005) aim a spotlight on crucial elements to be weighed in distance-learning:

> We must then consider that distance education is more than the simple transfer of an existing instructivist's verbal lecture to an electronic textual/image/audio environment which is enclosed within the pre-packaged structure of an off-the-shelf Internet-based

> course administration application. Computer-mediated distance education classes have a distinctive social structure, unlike those found in a face-to-face class. (p.291)

If the social structure of distance education is distinctive, perhaps the decision-making relationship between faculty and administration regarding on-line learning should mirror this distinction. Most universities' conventional decision-making methods and processes are inadequate in the face of matters that impact the mission, vision or strategy of an institution. In retrograde clarification that comes with sensemaking, administrators may be blind to the distinct core competencies faculty must demonstrate for successful distance-learning offerings. Too often, the decision to go on-line is based on the exact opposite of what Walker and Fraser posit. On-line learning is, in the eyes of many administrators, just like a face-to-face conventional class without all the act of being there. Yet faculty members who have elected to or have been drafted into offering distance-education know that there are steep learning curves, both in terms of technological aptitude and instructional design. Most faculty members have not been taught to teach face-to-face classes, let alone teaching on-line. Faculty members have been educated to become experts in their chosen disciplines. When it comes to meaningful on-line learning, administrators have to ask serious questions and be prepared to deal with the facts. Have faculty members' skills sets and knowledge regarding on-line teaching and learning been objectively assessed? Have requisite training and education provided for them in an organized and timely manner? Have faculty actively participated in distance-learning training and education and do they demonstrate competence in terms of knowledge and skills?

CREATING AUTHENTIC VALUE OR FABRICATING IT

In the Pew Research Center's report on "The Digital Revolution and Higher Education" authors Parker, Lenhart & Moore highlight an interesting basic assumption about the value of on-line learning that speaks to the sensemaking process of higher education administrators:

> The public and college presidents differ over the educational value of online courses. Only 29% of the public says online courses offer an equal value compared with courses taken in a class- room. Half (51%) of the college presidents surveyed say online courses provide the same value. (2011).

This gap regarding the perceived value of on-line courses is an example of retrograde clarification of the on-line academics debate. It also provides insight into organizational dynamics. Do administrators in institutions of higher education see the value of engaging faculty and public stakeholders in authentic dialogue about the value of on-line courses? What role should faculty play in decisions that impact the value of educational deliverables? More often than not, the decision to offer on-line academics is made without full faculty input and sets the stage upon which organizational dynamics play out. Some faculty members who question the value of on-line learning can be labeled "techno-peasants" who have not kept up with newer technologies or academic elitists or simply roadblocks to progress. Labeling, whether by administrators or fellow faculty, becomes the first step in the slippery slope of redefining faculty roles: you're either with the (on-line) program or you're not. Yet decisions to "go on-line" rarely include in-depth faculty input. Ought not those who develop, design and deliver on-line courses to have a voice in the decision to go on-line? Should faculty expertise and knowledge in academic disciplines take a backseat to administrative sensemaking fuelled by market demands?

WHEN GENERATING REVENUE TRUMPS MISSION AND VISION

The Pew report goes on to identify another basic assumption about on-line learning that is rooted in college presidents' beliefs about the purpose and goals of higher education. Among those presidents who frame the most important role of a college education as preparing graduates for success at work, 59% report on-line and in-person classes offer the same educational value. This is in contrast to other college presidents who see promoting personal and intellectual development as the role of college education. Of

this latter group, only 43% see equivalent value between on-line and in-person classes (Parker et al., 2011.) These are fundamental and profound philosophical differences. As colleges and universities shift focus from personal and intellectual development to work success, not only do the lines between community colleges and universities begin to blur, but the role of student also begins to insidiously shift from learner to education consumer. In turn, will expectations of education consumers digitize education to such an extent that getting a college degree becomes the equivalent of getting a passport stamp—evidence that that travelers visited a different country but not verification that they absorbed the culture and know the language? In other words, is the mission of higher education institutions being reframed in a deliberate, forward-thinking way or are administrators reacting to the vicissitudes of the changing economic landscape? Bear in mind that in 2001, UCLA stated that its on-line programs lost money and the university found that students were willing to pay more money in tuition to attend traditional lectures as a preferred mode of learning (Capper, 2001.)

All organizations need a vision—that idealized picture of a better, brighter future—to inspire and motivate. However, the inner sensemaking dialogue of university administrators seems caught in a retrograde clarifying sensemaking loop: the technology for on-line education exists; the marketplace competition for students is increasing more competitive; students want convenience—on-line learning is the answer. A shift in an organization's vision should stem from a purposeful and deliberate process that incorporates the viewpoints of primary stakeholders. It seems that in higher education the push for on-line academics is creating a picture of the future that assumes comparable value between face-to-face and on-line courses. The ideal future seems to have given way to market-driven survival tactics. When it comes to the important work of redefining a university's vision and strategy in these changing times it is worth remembering this admonishment from Puryear (1999): "Educational goals must drive technology decisions. Technology and economics are means, not ends." (p. 49)

WHAT ABOUT MISSION, VISION AND STRATEGY?

Clearly the landscape in higher education has changed as for-profit and not-for-profit institutions battle for prospective students and as the face of those future students has and continues to change. Venerable and established higher education institutions have, in many cases, found themselves ill-equipped to capture the new generation of students that have been wooed by more nimble, perhaps even cunning, for-profit colleges and universities. Organizational survival is a strong driver that shapes organizational dynamics, decisions and actions. Yet the move toward on-line academics, whether fueled by the availability of technology, the technological predilections of potential students or marketplace competition, ought to be a strategic focus rooted in the institution's mission rather than knee-jerk response. Consider this comment by Eric Kelderman in *The Chronicle of Higher Education:*

> In some circles, online education has a bad reputation. Accusations that some for-profit companies prey on unsuspecting students to rake in federal financial aid have led to image problems for the sector. Critics see online education, offered in particular by for-profit colleges, as the dark underbelly of higher education, with the quality of Internet courses second to the greed of unscrupulous investors. (2011)

What organizational dynamics and sensemaking processes are at play in not-for-profit institutions of higher education that make on-line academics—"the dark underbelly of higher education" (Kelderman, 2011)—seem like such a desirable mission or strategic focus? Some would assert that there was little strategic thinking going on; a more likely scenario is that not-for-profit higher education administrators see potential revenues being diverted from their institutions and decided to get into the race. In successful organization, mission, vision and strategy are aligned through an authentic, collaborative process that addresses the interests of both market and non-market stakeholders.

CERTIFICATION AS A PROXY FOR SOUND DECISION-MAKING

Some colleges and universities reinforce their decisions about becoming a distance-learning player by engaging in retrograde clarification activities such as certifying their distance education offerings. Organizations such as Quality Matters, or QM as it is known, exist as a quality assurance regulator that uses "a faculty-centered, peer review process that is designed to certify the quality of online and blended courses." (Quality Matters, 2011.) Many college and university administrators push to have their on-line education courses vetted through the QM certification process. While QM certification is a plus for an on-line course, it isn't a substitute for an institution of higher education's internal organizational process of insuring alignment among mission, vision and strategy. Once the first step on the slippery slope of distance-learning has been initiated, what is the likelihood of turning back?

Colleges and universities, for the most part, are mission-driven organizations. It is their purpose that shapes their identity, what they do and how they do it. And unlike the corporate world, academe has, for better or worse, used the mission statement as the hub around which its organizational culture and reputation revolve. Decisions about distance education should be part of a thoughtful, strategic dialogue that includes key stakeholders—faculty, prospective students, administration, instructional design experts, IT professionals, market research experts—to first develop a position on distance-learning as it relates to the mission of the institution and then, as appropriate, develop a comprehensive strategy and objectives to realize mutually agreed upon distance education goals for the institution. A reactive, closed-door, market-driven foray into distance education can erode a university's mission and culture faster than you can say "Click on the Content Tab for course information."

Peeling back the surface layer of decisions to offer distance-learning education uncovers several critical elements of organizational dynamics—leadership, strategy and organizational culture. Schneider (2000) describes four core organizational cultures—control, collaboration, competence, and cultivation (p.27). Schneider posits that alignment among organizational culture, leadership, and strategy makes for a more productive and effective organization. Unless an institution of higher education's core culture is one of control with its concomitant authoritative leadership, then a strong case can be made for opening up dialogue and shedding light on the organizational dynamics that push faculty and university resources into distance-learning ventures that may be misaligned or that need to be realigned with a university's strategy, mission and culture.

BRINGING LIGHT TO DARK MATTERS

Even though a college or university may have already made the decision to pursue on-line academics, this does not mean that faculty members do not have a voice in the on-going sensemaking process. Faculty voice, which in some cases has become dormant in the face of the administrative pressures, is a powerful force in shaping organizational dynamics. Faculty members can refocus or change a decision if they add data and expert judgment to the on-going sensemaking processes at their institution. Faculty members can use qualitative and quantitative data about their on-line teaching and learning experiences to re-frame institutional approaches to on-line learning. Gathering student input about the value of on-line learning experiences vs. traditional classes can assist in determining what subject matter and content (or parts thereof) are best suited to on-line learning or face-to-face classes. Identifying student readiness factors that predict success in on-line learning and using them to pre-screen students would not only be the ethically appropriate thing to do, but also could serve as a mechanism to better align institutional mission and vision with distance-learning options. Taking tuition monies from students ill-prepared or ill-suited to distance-learning is higher education's version of sub-prime mortgages.

Most faculty members know that there are different learning styles (Kolb, 2005). Leveraging that expert knowledge in full-throated dialogue with faculty colleagues and then with administration would not only lead the way to the appropriate use of on-line academics, but also could reinvigorate current pedagogical approaches in conventional classroom settings. This robust dialogue would significantly change organizational dynamics and place the role of faculty front and center in on-line academics. Non-

conformity that is borne out of a commitment to a meaningful institutional mission, vision and strategy—not merely differing ideologies and role relationships—may be the most critical shift in the time-honored patterns of faculty-administration relationships. To achieve this, faculty members must be willing to shift the existing paradigm about the way things typically get accomplished at a university and assume the responsibility for shaping the nature and quality of learning experiences. In other words, faculty members have an obligation to actively shape the organizational dynamics that inform decisions about academic programs and delivery. It has been far too easy for faculty to stay immersed in their areas of specialization, either to pursue that which they love or to avoid organizational politics. Regardless of the reason, faculty members must actively reclaim and redefine their role in shaping organizational dynamics. Without the voice of faculty members influencing and driving organizational decisions and implementation of distance-learning, on-line academics may simply come to be viewed as the 21st century's version of correspondence courses.

Where to begin? Assume that the die has been cast and that distance-learning is a "go." Further assume that the university as we know it will be different as it responds to the societal shift to consumerism and the vicissitudes of the economy. Re-establish quality education. Leverage the best of experts' sensemaking processes. Faculty can research and develop ways for prospective learners to determine the "best-fit" learning delivery method for their future educational success. Shift the focus away from the lightning-quick technological advances and design learning contracts (Knowles, 1986). Become expert at promoting learning. If the organizational dynamics do not or will not support these efforts, change them. Develop informal support groups with colleagues to pilot changes in how distance-learning is approached, planned, delivered and evaluated. Replace isolating autonomy with meaningful collaborative effort. The dark matter of organizational dynamics is shaped both by what is actively created as well as that which arises from self-interest or neglect. Faculty must actively engage and commit to changing the interplay of people, policies and practices in their institutions if light is to be shed on the dark matter of organizational dynamics and on-line academics.

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