When Worlds Collide: Cultural Barriers to a University-School Collaboration

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In recent years, fundamental shifts in external environments have led many states to enact more collaborative forms of education. Increased efforts to build linkages across education and business sectors have taken place in states such as Oregon, Colorado, and Georgia (Hargis 1995; Lynch 1994; Schwartz 1992). This general trend is often described as "seamless education." The idea of seamless education suggests that collaboration across sectors, such as K-12 and higher education, yields significant advancements for students. In short, resources may be reallocated to the teaching and learning enterprise through savings derived from the elimination of service and program duplication. Additionally, student flow from high school to college may be streamlined as a result of the increased interaction and accountability between the two systems.

Boyer (1983) was one of the first to discuss such a notion when he highlighted the need to create communication between educational sectors. Hodgkinson (1985) put forth a similar idea in his discussion of education as "one system." Lara and Mitchell (1986) discussed the "seamless web"— the interdependence of educational institutions — and argued that educational institutions continue to follow overly segmented organizational models developed in the nineteenth century. Seamless education supports a more modernized "systems" approach in which the interconnectedness between organizations and their environments is taken into account (Beer 1966; Dolence and Norris 1995; Scott 1987).

A belief that schools and colleges operating as one interconnected system would better serve student needs was a driving factor in the 1991 alliance between the University of Southern Colorado (USC) and Pueblo School District 60. The Alliance, as it has come to be called, is the focus of this article, which adopts a phenomenological approach to understanding the processes involved in creating such a collaborative effort.

Organizational collaboration is not without its problems. Cultural barriers between higher education and K-12, in particular, at times made the Alliance seem like two worlds colliding rather than a mutually rewarding relationship. The following comments from a high school teacher and a university professor allude to some of the cultural barriers:

> I'm very aware of the need to work with the university to strengthen what we do for our students, particularly our minority students. Most of the teachers I work with are willing to make significant sacrifices to improve our schools. But at the same time, I have a hard time working with someone who adopts a patronizing attitude toward me as a teacher. College professors may exist in an ivory tower but we work in the real world. [comments from a high school teacher]

> I think the state of higher education in this country offers a degree of testimony to our effectiveness. The biggest educational problems are with the lower levels and we all have a responsibility to solve these problems. The Alliance represents the university's commitment to helping to solve some of the problems with our schools and in particular the educational opportunities afforded minority students. [comments from a university professor]

The goal of this article is to explore some of the cultural barriers to collaborative efforts on the part of a university and a school district. The impetus for such university-school collaborations historically has resided with colleges and universities because of the role they play in preparing teachers and school administrators, and because post-secondary institutions set the academic requirements that high school students must meet to gain admission to college. This paper provides background information about the Alliance, highlights the methodology used in conducting this study, presents its findings, and discusses the implications of this research.

Background

The Alliance was officially forged in 1991 through a formal agreement struck between Pueblo School District 60's Board of Education and USC's governing body—the State Board of Agriculture. The principal goal of the Alliance was and is to improve K-16 education by channeling savings accrued through increased efficiency. The strategy for achieving greater efficiency involves combining specific operations and resources through a series of formalized agreements or linkages. Thus far, twenty-one linkages have been developed including the following: curriculum articulation

in the sciences, high school senior to college sophomore program, library resource sharing, telecommunications technology linkage, the development of a shared Center for Teaching and Learning, shared business services, and the creation of the Pueblo School for Arts and Sciences. Curriculum articulation in the sciences is a program designed to create a comprehensive K-16 science curriculum. The high school senior to college sophomore program allows for delivery of the college curriculum into high schools so students may receive dual credit. Library resource sharing involves networking the USC library with the four Pueblo high school libraries. The telecommunications technology linkage connects all district high schools and the district's administration building to the university's gateway to the Internet. This has enabled district students, teachers, and administrators to have access to information available throughout the world. The Center for Teaching and Learning provides resources to teachers and students and is composed of ten professors from the university and six teachers from the local schools. One of the Center's primary functions is to prepare USC students for teaching careers. The business services linkage involves contractual agreements to share various business operations such as a printing shop and vehicle repair center. The Pueblo School for the Arts and Sciences is a charter school with the charter held by the Alliance under contract with Pueblo School District 60. The school operates on the "paideia" concept of schooling made popular by Mortimer Adler. In short, the school stresses high academic standards and parental involvement in the teaching and learning process.

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Some linkages were formed out of the early work of a Restructuring and Reallocation Task Force, composed of members from the university, the district, and the business community. A primary source of financial savings has been a reorganization of non-teaching related services such as the unification of vehicle maintenance. Duplication of many services has thus been eliminated and the savings have been passed on to the classroom. In some cases, service linkages have resulted in the elimination of positions. Through employee attrition, the Alliance has been able to phase in such changes without displacing staff.

As a result of restructuring, USC and District 60 report channeling some $3.5 million from administrative support areas to improving education over the academic years 1992-93 and 1993-94. Reallocation of funds for the 1994-95 school year were in the area of

$4 million. Although some of the linkages have yielded savings, others, such as the Center for Teaching and Learning, reflect the reallocation of funds to enhance education. The Center has been able to provide improved resources and staff support for teachers within District 60 as well as enhanced teacher-education opportunities for USC students.

The degree of effectiveness and the educational advantages the Alliance has yielded for students is still unclear. Ultimately, increases in the percentage of students from Pueblo who are graduated from high school and then have successful college careers will have to be formally assessed. However, it is not the intent of this paper to offer an evaluation of the educational effectiveness of the Alliance. Although obviously this is an important question, the central concern here relates to the process of collaboration itself: How was the Alliance made possible? And, in particular: What barriers had to be overcome in bringing two separate organizations into a synergistic relationship?

Method

Organizational culture may be thought of as the values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms that shape the social life of an institution (Smircich 1983; Rhoads and Tierney 1992; Tierney 1988). Culture offers a common framework that people use to make sense of their lives (Morgan 1986). But culture is not a static phenomenon; culture changes over time through social interaction. Seen in this light, culture is both the shaper of social life as well as the outcome of social interaction. This is the dialectical view of culture espoused by Geertz (1973) who described culture as "webs of significance" that people both create and become trapped within.

Numerous higher education scholars have highlighted the peculiar ways members of post-secondary communities have of making sense of their worlds (Becher 1989; Bergquist 1992; Clark 1987; Tierney and Rhoads 1993). Likewise, K-12 scholars have discussed the idea of school culture; that is, the unique patterns of interactions and sense-making strategies that students, teachers, and school administrators use to conduct themselves in their educational surroundings (Feiman-Nemser and Floden 1995; Lieberman 1988; Lortie 1975; Sarason 1971). Both areas of cultural inquiry — higher education and K-12 — clearly point out the complex role organizational culture plays as an impediment or catalyst for organizational change (Chaffee and Tierney 1988; Fullen 1991; Van Maanen 1983). In short, change efforts are unlikely to take root within the daily fabric of organizational life if strategies are not developed for dealing with the values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of students, teachers, and administrators.

To understand the role that culture plays in promoting or inhibiting change, educational researchers have tended to adopt qualitative strategies. Such strategies have been popular ever since cultural views of organizations were first spawned in the late 1970s

and early 1980s (Davis 1984; Deal and Kennedy 1982; Ouchi 1977; Peters and Waterman 1982; Pettigrew 1979; Schein 1985; Van Maanen 1983).

The data for this case study derive from two site visits conducted during the academic years 1992-1993 and 1994-1995. During the first visit, more than forty faculty and staff from the university and school district were interviewed. The second site visit was more focused and specifically involved interviews with twenty-two faculty and staff closely connected with the collaborative efforts between the school district and the university. These key informants were identified through an analysis of interview transcripts obtained during the first site visit. Interviews were guided by a structured protocol that was adapted according to the organizational position of the interview respondent. For example, while teachers and professors were asked similar questions, slight adjustments were made based on their different organizational roles.

In addition to interviews, a number of documents were collected and examined as part of the data analysis. Documents included initial drafts used to guide the formation of the Alliance, later documents produced as part of its guiding principles, newspaper articles, the university's strategic plan, and various policy perspectives published by the school district and the university. Reports published by the state of Colorado were also analyzed. These documents, combined with interview transcripts and field notes, formed the body of data which was analyzed. The use of documents in combination with data obtained through interviews and informal observations offers a degree of triangulation and provides greater corroboration of the findings (Denzin 1987).

Conceptual categories were identified based on a careful reading and re-reading of documents and interview transcripts. Such a process is discussed by Patton (1980) as inductive content analysis in which patterns emerge from the data rather than being imposed prior to data analysis. Initial drafts of this article were circulated among interview participants as a means to collect their thoughts and reactions to the author's interpretations. Feedback was then considered in subsequent rewrites. This falls in line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) discussion of "member checks" in which they contend that research subjects should have the opportunity to contribute to shaping the interpretations of the researcher.

Findings

Based on a cultural analysis, four barriers to achieving greater organizational collaboration were identified: status differences, language differences, different views of organizational change, and differences in professional identity.

Status Differences

Members of both District 60 and USC commented on perceptions and misperceptions of "the other" among teachers and professors.

Perceptions and misperceptions most often were associated with differences in status and credentials and resulted in additional communication barriers that had to be overcome. For example, a faculty member from USC commented, "We changed the structure, but not the culture. Part of the problem is credentialing. People in the school district tend to have master's level training, whereas the faculty from USC have doctoral training." This individual went on to point out how such differences sometimes get in the way of communication in that professors may adopt the position of "expert" and speak down to teachers. A senior-level school administrator offered a similar point of view:

> College teachers tend to see themselves as more intelligent and the K-12 teachers see university professors as snobby . . . . This may be far from the truth but it seems to be the reality that we have to deal with. It's not easy sometimes convincing a professor that he may be wrong. And likewise, it's not always easy for a teacher to admit that a professor may be right about something. It's a real challenge.

Another faculty member at USC alluded to the potential problem of academic elitism on the part of some members of the university and the general mistrust of academics on the part of members of the district.

> I think we are guilty of claiming to know more than we know sometimes. It's part of the culture of the professorate to assert one's ideas in an authoritative manner. This gets in the way of our communication with teachers. I think they see us as pompous know-it-alls at times and back away from fully sharing with us for fear we will put down their ideas.

Language Differences

Overcoming barriers derived from the different backgrounds of teachers and professors has been a challenge. Part of the communication problems that have resulted relates to language differences: academic jargon versus school jargon. Significant thought has been given to getting people together and "on the same page." An Alliance administrator spoke to this issue: "I worry about getting appropriate resources and people together to work on the same task, at the same time, in the same language." The comments from this individual highlight how language — the fundamental code of culture — can limit communication across school and university cultures.

Meetings between teachers and professors as well as school and university administrators often were stymied by miscommunication

among participants. A professor from the university commented:

> I get so frustrated sometimes by my inability to
> effectively communicate at some of the meetings we
> have. I don't know exactly how to explain it but
> there is definitely a communication barrier between
> the teachers in the district and the faculty here at the
> university.

And a university administrator added, "The biggest challenge has been getting beyond the two different arenas that we work within. And trying to make sense of communications from the other's arena." A teacher from District 60 offered some insights into the communication barriers to which the preceding individuals alluded:

> A lot of people don't realize how different working
> on a college campus is from working in a school
> district. This is most vivid at some of the Alliance
> meetings where it seems like both sides are speaking
> past the other side. They talk about faculty senate
> and we talk about the teachers union and neither
> group understands what exactly these organizations
> stand for or mean.

The preceding teacher highlights how one's professional identity — which is in part shaped by the local organizational context — is influenced by the many contacts and interactions one has. In this case, teachers in Pueblo deal with the union, while faculty at USC must contend with university governance structures.

Different Views of Organizational Change

The Alliance also has had to deal with different norms and expectations related to organizational change. A senior-level administrator from USC commented: "We have some major cultural differences. Change-oriented people versus maintenance-oriented thinkers. The latter group tend to see things as they are." Another professor stated, "We had a pretty bureaucratic structure in higher education, but when I got involved with K-12 they put us to shame. The expectation on pace of change was uneven between the two institutions. We were more willing to make changes than they were." And a third added, "Higher education is very diffuse and K-12 is so top down. Public schools are so centralized even though they are physically disjointed. Unions also are centralized and opposed to site-based decision making."

Teachers from the district also had thoughts about organizational life and change. Some agreed that they were restricted by a more bureaucratic structure. Others spoke to additional differences related to views of organizational change. One

teacher pointed out that when it comes to innovation, professors tend to adopt a theoretician's perspective and teachers tend to reflect a practitioner's point of view. Professors are more likely to look at the big picture, whereas teachers see the day-to-day problems that changes might create. The challenge, as this teacher noted, is to get faculty to think more like teachers and to get teachers to think more like faculty. "Each needs to try to understand the other's perspective and where they are coming from."

A teacher from District 60 offered insightful comments about dealing with the different perspectives of organizational change professors and teachers bring to collaborative efforts: "An important part of the process is getting everybody on board. This means meeting for extended periods of time to bring us all to a similar page. This may take longer but it's important to get everybody involved in the change process." A professor offered a similar point: "There's a lot of networking going on. We are finding out what's going on in the schools and they are finding out what's going on 'up on the hill' [at the university]. This has helped us overcome some of the resentment."

> **What barriers had to be overcome in bringing two separate organizations into a synergistic relationship?**

Differences in Professional Identity

Varying perceptions of organizational change in part relate the larger reality of how teachers and professors view their work and how they view themselves as teachers or as professors. On the one hand, colleges and universities tend to grant greater freedom to faculty than public schools offer to teachers. Professors have greater control over their daily schedule as well as their time in general. The idea of academic freedom is widely embraced throughout academe. We speak of professors as being evaluated rather than supervised. Indeed, academic culture is shaped to a large degree by the idea of collegiality in which even the president is seen "not as a boss but rather as serving as *primus inter pares,* or 'first among equals'" (Birnbaum 1988, p. 89).

Schools, on the other hand, have embraced the idea of supervision and "technocratic" authority (Foster 1986; Wolcott 1977). Accountability issues are central to debates about the schooling process. A USC professor spoke to these different organizational styles: "The differences relate to a mindset of freedom versus control. In academe, deans tend to do things rather informally and quickly; school districts tend to operate more within the structure of the school day. They have to go through all kinds of red tape. Even to work beyond 3:30."

Issues of accountability and autonomy have profound effects upon the norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes of teachers and professors. Public school teachers may not have the professional discretion to implement organizational initiatives to the same degree that college and university professors do (unless perhaps they have embraced site-based, shared decision making). It is hardly surprising, then, that different perceptions about change and the rate of change persist between the two organizational cultures.

Another cultural difference influencing the professional identity of professors and teachers relates to their obligations beyond students. For faculty, disciplinary ties are a major source of professional status and may direct their attention from teaching and service to students (Austin 1990; Clark 1987; Fairweather 1995; Fairweather and Rhoads 1995). One professor talked about how disciplinary ties have limited the involvement of some USC faculty in Alliance-related curriculum reform: "Part of the problem is that the system does not supply a means for people making a paradigm shift in their role. Faculty all have a role in their disciplines. To ask them to redefine what it means to be a faculty member is not easy."

Overcoming barriers derived from the different backgrounds of teachers and professors has been a challenge.

Despite the challenge posed by disciplinary orientations, senior-level administrators at USC have demonstrated visible support for faculty involvement in the Alliance. Faculty believe this has definitely carried over to the promotion and tenure process. As one professor noted: "The reward structure of the university has been reframed so that Alliance work will be rewarded. The president and provost have made it clear that faculty will be rewarded for their curriculum reform efforts."

While USC faculty must deal with their academic disciplines, District 60 teachers must deal with the union, which has not been entirely supportive of the Alliance. For example, members of the union challenged the Pueblo School for Arts and Sciences on procedural and constitutional grounds concerning school charters, which are established by the state (a U.S. District Court ruled in favor of the charter school). Because of the need for union input, acting quickly on Alliance-sponsored initiatives is not always possible. USC professors are not unionized and at times seem hard pressed to understand this additional layer of decision making. To USC professors, the union is just "one more layer of bureaucracy." As one professor explained, "Everybody in the school district is unionized. There are nine different collective bargaining units. They approach everything from a 'protect your own interest' mentality."

Conclusion/Implications

As part of the larger effort to reform teaching and learning, various strategies for creating seamless educational structures need to be explored. Based on the findings from this study, several issues should be weighed as universities consider outreach activities designed to better link K-12 and higher education.

First, strategies must be developed to help professors and teachers deal with differences related to status, language, and professional identity. Participants must be challenged early in the collaborative process to think beyond their own cultural experience as a teacher or a professor (or as a university or school administrator) and imagine life in the other's shoes. Knowledge of the strongly held beliefs and understandings of the work of teachers and the work of professors is helpful for each group to have. The sharing of knowledge about one's professional identity and culture may be the first step in developing an accepting attitude toward differences. This will alleviate some of the tensions revolving around perceptions of professors as "elitists" existing within the "ivory towers" of academe and views of teachers as "anti-intellectuals." The sharing of cultural knowledge is more likely to take place when egalitarian environments are established and when equal representation and opportunity to speak are central. Thus, one implication of this study suggests the following: *It is important to create interactional settings and environments in which all sides are equally represented and in which emphasis is placed on hearing all participants.*

Another helpful strategy is establishing common understandings at the outset. In the USC-Pueblo Alliance, early curricular discussions provided enough of a common cultural context from which to foster additional and more advanced understandings. Thus, a second implication of this study may be stated as follows: *A key to dealing with organizational differences is to identify common ground upon which to begin group discussions and to build further connections.* In establishing common ground as a means for early dialogue, it is probably wise to avoid some of the more contentious issues that may be dealt with at a later time.

Another area of cultural differences is tied to views of organizational change, which is in part associated with varying degrees of professional autonomy. Teachers and professors tend to differ in terms of the organizational autonomy they are accorded. As a result, professors get frustrated with what they perceive as overly structured and bureaucratized solutions that may stall organizational change. At the same time, many teachers are weary of professorial initiatives that seem to lack grounding in the day-to-day realities of teachers' and students' lives. A strategy is needed that might help each group understand the diverse institutional policies, practices, and structures that shape one's working life. For example, it may be helpful for university professors to have greater familiarity with the

role of unions and how they contribute to the working lives of teachers. Likewise, teachers need to understand the complex dynamics of faculty life and the multiple pulls they experience. Thus, a third implication of this study suggests the following: *It is important to provide substantive opportunity for teachers and professors to learn about the organizational dynamics with which each group must contend on a daily basis.* This may be accomplished through joint educational activities such as in-service training programs, retreats, workshops, or colloquia. This strategy should also help to alleviate some of the cultural barriers associated with language and status differences.

Bringing people into ongoing interactions has been the primary way of resolving some of the cultural barriers between the University of Southern Colorado and Pueblo District 60. This seems perfectly logical as culture itself provides the basis for the social interactions of organizational participants. Thus, interactions between the two cultures have resulted in the emergence of different ways of thinking and acting in this new organizational arrangement. As a result, a new organizational culture reflecting aspects of the district and the university is evolving. Clearly, understanding the cultural barriers faced by universities and schools is a key to advancing seamless education.

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