

From Academic to Administrative Management

Concordia University's Experiment in Focal Adjustment

By Gilles Bourgeois B.A. M.Sc. CHRP
Executive Director, HR&ER, Concordia University

A Concordia Capsule

- Founded in 1974, the result of a merger of Loyola College (1896) and Sir George Williams University (1926)
- 30,824 students, 84% are undergraduate, and 2/3 are full time students
- 180 undergraduate programs, 70 graduate programs
- Faculty of Arts & Science (A&S) has 55% of enrollment while Engineering & Computer Science (ENCS) has 20%
- There are 3144 international students
- The university employs approximately 5200 including research staff

Preliminary Background

- University finances were forced to undergo significant restructuring in the mid to late nineties through decreases in government funding.
- In 2001, all faculties undertook a strategic planning exercise, that emphasized the need to focus on the academic mission within each department and faculty.
- Administrative responsibilities were identified in a number of faculties as drawing limited academic resources (Chairs and Vice-Deans) away from the academic mission

Preliminary Background(2)

- The number of academic administrators had been significantly reduced through an aggressive budgeting exercise that emphasized the need for resources towards teaching and research.
- The academic renewal of curriculum and research were made priorities.
- Unionization of staff was completed with 99% of employees (excluding research) in 11 bargaining units thus adding to administrative complexity.
- Administration had become more complex with new funding procedures influencing budgets and employees becoming unionized with collective agreements.

The Challenge

- Create a new model to deal with increased administrative complexity while at the same time dealing with decreases in academic administrative resources (consolidation of academic departments=fewer academic departmental chairs) and assure a greater focus on the academic mission at a time of massive hiring of new faculty members.
- Redefine the role of the decanal office in the relationships within the faculty.

The Challenge (2)

- Create an environment where academics in leadership roles will transform themselves into becoming academic leaders rather than remaining as academic managers similarly to what Deans did with their roles
- Assign the role of manager to managers

The Traditional Model

- Universities in the Canadian province of Quebec follow a very traditional model of university organization. There may be slight variations in nomenclature but the structure is the same.
- Academic disciplines are organized in departments with a chair duly elected for 5 year renewable term,.
- All staff and faculty members within a department report to the Chair of the department

The Traditional Model(2)

- Departments are grouped within faculties with a Dean elected for 5 year term renewable once.
- Dean proposes 2 to 4 Vice or Associate Deans for approval by the Provost.
- Vice-Deans are responsible for specific portfolio responsibilities.
- Deans report to Provost (elected 5 year term renewable once) who in turn reports to the Rector of the University.

A New Model in ENCS

- Engineering was the first faculty to restructure itself.
- It had seen a dramatic increase in its enrollment from its Computer Science component.
- The first change was to relieve Associate Deans from all administrative portfolio responsibilities (i.e. communications, student life, administration, external relations).
- An executive director of administration position was created to have all administrative responsibilities within the faculty. This included having staff report to this position.

A New Model in ENCS (2)

- In the departments, a new position of departmental administrator was created with all departmental staff reporting to this position. Henceforth only faculty members report to departmental chairs.
- Departmental administrators while supporting departmental Chair's direction, officially report to the executive director of administration.

A New Model in A&S

- In 1996, the first departmental administrators (da's) appeared in the larger academic departments of A&S.
- The da's reported to the Chair but were responsible for all non-academic staff and the application of the various collective agreements including the academic agreements.

A New Model in A&S(2)

- In 2003, two vice-deanships were replaced by two staff positions. Directors who are responsible for budget, human resources, student services, faculty communications, and enrollment management.

Consequences & Observations

- Demographics of universities in North America are such that more than 1/3 of faculty members are expected to retire over the next 6 years and there may be a lack of qualified replacements.
- Massive replacement hiring of new faculty members will require concerted effort to integrate them successfully into their academic career.
- Displacing administrative roles away from academic administrators will allow them to focus on academic integration of new faculty.

Consequences & Observations(2)

- In ENCS some chairs had difficulty with the loss of direct authority over some staff in the department. This has meant that there has been a requirement for HR to provide role coaching to some chairs to assist them in repositioning themselves.
- The application of appropriate criteria and competencies in the selection process for new da's is essential if one is to avoid a 'super secretaries' outcome.

Consequences & Observations(3)

- One of the expected positives of the transition to professional managers is continuity since these positions are not subject to the electoral process applied to academic administrators.
- Within the same university there have been 2 models applying the same principle. Is one superior to the other? Should one or the other model replace what is in effect? The answer is 'no' since either model would probably fail in the other faculty since it would be inimical to the existing culture.

Consequences & Observations(4)

- Two faculties have yet to follow A&S or ENCS.
- Fine Arts has adopted the da's model but has chosen to retain the role of academic management in administration.
- JMSB (school of business) retains a model of full academic responsibility for administration- The traditional model.
- The role of HR&ER has been to assist, advise and support the change process. It has acted as an external consultant and services provider to the transition.

Consequences & Observations(5)

- The model at Concordia remains in sharp contrast to the model in effect in Canadian hospitals.
- There, administrators have the most senior position and responsibility for policy development/direction.
- At Concordia, the academic leaders have retained their primacy at the departmental, faculty and senior governance levels, having only shed the administrative tasks associated with leadership. This remains a strength of this model and fosters the importance of the academic mission of the university.

Success?

- It is still too early to tell.
- The degree of completion of the change process for 75% of the university can be plotted on a project line. Some are stuck at the first step while others are successfully operational-This is where HR can best assist by rendering support to those in difficulty and intent on progressing along the continuum.
- Probably the best indicator of success would be the presence of 5 year rolling operating plans rather than the practice of having 5 year plans that focused on an elected term's mandate.