

Institutional Mission and Identity: How Do We Carry the Culture to the Electronic Forum?

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ABSTRACT

The culture and traditions of colleges and universities have been foci of attention by strategic planners, development officers and consultants. Developing a unique market niche to attract students and keep alumni affiliated is a constant struggle. As we build new electronic universities and add electronic courses and dimensions of existing colleges and universities, these same questions of uniqueness, attraction and affiliation will begin to crop up. This issue also has ramifications for basic education schools both public and state supported who are attempting to widen their image electronically. In this article, which is an exegetical and hermeneutical piece, the author hopes to pose some questions about culture and mission and make suggestions for extending these to the electronic environment.

Keywords

Mission, culture, identity, electronic forum

Introduction

The development of a strong and clear school culture is important for both the success and vitality of every school and institution of higher learning and corresponding student success (Baldrige & Deal, 1983; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Stolp, 1994). Higher education institutions have invested thousands of hours and dollars in analyzing, defining and promoting their particular vision, mission, charism, or deep story. Institutions of higher education with buildings and physical classrooms, (henceforth termed "traditional") continue to struggle to define themselves in terms of identity, the new arena of online learning adds another dimension to an already complicated problem of identity and culture. How will we translate "strong cultures" into the online community? How does a culture develop when there is no traditional counterpart? I hope that by exegeting some of the principles found in traditional school culture that applications can be made to the electronic forum.

Discussion

Culture and Identity

The definition of culture, long debated, congeals around the concepts of story, history, climate, identity, symbols, language, rules, feelings, shared values and charism (Baldrige & Deal, 1983; Bolman & Deal, 2001; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Geertz, 1975; McBrien & Brandt 1997, Neuhauser, Bender, & Stromberg, 2000; Schein, 1985; Stolp, 1994). Deal & Peterson (1999) explain the culture as, "...unwritten rules and traditions, norms, and expectations that seem to permeate everything: the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about, whether they seek out colleagues for help or not..." (pp. 2-3). Values, traditions and beliefs are often manifested in relationships, architecture, symbols, myths and organizational structure are all part of the culture of an organization. Geertz (1975) reminds us culture is not simply an abstract concept, but a public expression.

Along with or part of the culture of the institution is its articulated identity. The mission statement, slogan, logo, or defining statement of purpose, all add to the identity of such places. Sometimes this defined mission or identity translates into a statement from which strategic goals emanate. Other times, the charism is a touchstone from which all activity and symbols flow.

In recent years Catholic universities have grappled significantly with their "Catholic" identity in light of a document by John Paul II (1990), *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* which called them to prove they are identifiably Catholic. This call to be identifiable is not limited to religious schools. All institutions struggle with their identifying cultural characteristics of culture to market themselves in the recruitment of students and strengthen the bonds of

affiliation to develop stronger alumni relations. Transmitting this particular identity and culture to the online market will be another level of challenge for institutions with and without traditional counterparts.

Cultural Aspects

Culture, as a set of beliefs, and traditions held by an organization's members, is often representative of a deep story from the institution's founding or a true charisma can be linked to the founding of the school. It would be obvious Harvard has a unique place within the US culture and that it has its own culture, with corresponding values, traditions, symbols, celebrations, and, even, perhaps, its own language.

Looking at school culture differs somewhat from other organizations or business cultures. Deal & Peterson (1999) identify the functions and impacts of culture as they impact schools:

Culture fosters school effectiveness and productivity; culture fosters school change and improvement efforts; culture builds identification of staff, students and administrators; culture amplifies the energy, motivation, and vitality of a school staff, students, and community; and culture increases the focus of daily behavior and attention on what is important and valued. (pp. 7-9)

I presently teach at a university with a strong US military history. This university has buildings constantly remind the student of its past. Fortress-like buildings, flag raising ceremonies, military and patriotic songs wafting through the air from the bell tower each hour and the presence of fatigue-dressed Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) students in training reinforce a history and identity. Even if this institution attempts to distance itself from its military history, its edifices, ceremonies, and alumni memory bring it back to its roots. In short, it has a strong culture. But in this age of online services and classes, will those students who never step foot on campus experience a similar culture? Is there a way to transmit the ceremonies, stories, delivery of services, architecture and history to the online learning community?

This university struggles to redefine its tradition of education in terms of leadership, civic engagement and scholarship. Focus groups of stakeholders meet regularly to discuss vision and mission as ongoing strategic planning takes place. University alumni relations and development personnel constantly tap into traditions to keep donors connected to the institution, while recruiters play on the uniqueness of the school to attract new students. How will this university, with its rich tradition of civic engagement and leadership preparation, communicate this culture to a student enrolled in an online course?

Symbols

Neuhauser, Bender & Stromberg (2000) suggest symbols and language are, "...the most visible and simplest level of culture" (p.11). Most colleges and universities have strong affiliation to cultural expressions such as mascots, school colors, songs, or ceremonies. Whether it is the building of a bonfire at Texas A&M or the fights over what shade of red the high school team needs to wear, these particular symbols are related to can have high levels of affinity for stakeholders.

These symbols, whether they are mascots, rings or images, are important connecting points for members of a school community. The connectedness to these symbols helps to internalize something about the culture of the institution. At first, symbols may seem to be the easiest area for the electronic forum to address. The same symbols can be transferred onto a website or email. The famous dome, the pervasive star or the omnipresent bulldog can make their way magically onto every page in a variety of ways. But will this engender the same kind of loyalty is fostered by traditional symbols?

Architecture

Whether it is the English collegiate gothic architecture of Oxford or the colonial towers of Harvard, architecture influences education. Large state universities whose enrollments burgeoned in the 1960's may reflect the responsive nature of their campuses in block buildings that are more functional than aesthetic. In many cases universities have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in landscaping and architectural improvements (i.e. Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA) to make a campus more inviting, intimate and user-friendly. Consultants are hired to help plan spaces with white noise so students may gather. Flowers are planted, art and landscape features embedded in the campus to promote a vision of education that moves a students' spirit along

with his or her mind. This artistic sensibility or historic preservation, even if not protected by law, becomes a matter of stakeholder pride. How will the architectural sense of an online institution be developed?

Behaviors, Stories, Folklore, Habits and Ceremonies

Schools are replete with ceremonies. Kindergarten graduation, the first school play, proms and promenades, sports banquets and awards, homecomings and honors convocations are part of every level of education. This may spring from our ecclesiastical connections or from an innate need to pass on ceremonies that have been personally meaningful or expressive. At the higher educational level we have continued the tradition of specialized colors and garb for degree recipients. Particular institutions have even designed academic regalia and or dress accessories (neck ties) peculiar to their institution.

Beyond the ceremonies are the stories and folklore of days gone by. In some cases this might be the semi-authenticated ghostly apparitions that have manifested themselves over the years at a particular house, sorority, field, or concert hall. Or, it may be the tale of great deeds or pranks performed by engineering students on an annual basis, trying to best the class before in their new and brilliant feat of engineering skill and tomfoolery. More profoundly, the folklore and stories of schools and universities include the great events and the sad moments that have shaped an institution.

Communication and Underlying Assumptions

Perhaps no other area of this discourse could foster more scrutiny than the ways in which organizations communicate. Each institution will be evaluated by their messages, publications, memos, internal announcements, dissemination of information, processes of decision-making, shared authority, and processes to determine the policies of hiring, firing, reprimanding, rewarding, etc. The perception by stakeholders of how well the institutions does this helps to form its culture. Do stakeholders perceive the school as informative and responsive to their needs? Are faculties involved in the decision-making process? Are students a part of curricular or other decisions? How do alumni views find their way into the forums other than through donations?

In the departmental communications realm, the ways that support staff have been trained to respond to the needs of others helps to strengthen or weaken a culture. Is there a collaborative model working so the registrar will support the research of the biology department? Will students' need for financial aid be responded to quickly? Do faculty include students in their research or teaching agenda?

The use of informal communications by the savvy administrator can help to strengthen a school's identity by using the gossip to his or her advantage. The less sophisticated manager may be "done in" by these misrepresentations and find it impossible to function within a milieu of semi-truth and rapid accretions in informal communication. The smaller bits of communication around the water cooler, the interaction between and among professional and support staff, and the relationships that develop throughout an organization are all part of this web of culture and communication that must be examined. Given the speed of the internet and the inability to gather informal information in the same way how will we be able to control and maintain formal and informal communications to strengthen online culture?

What about the underlying assumptions about a university or school? According to Neuhauser, Bender & Stromberg (2000), "The underlying assumptions and core values are the deepest part of the culture. They are the hub of the wheel for everything else about culture" (p. 6). For schools with a particular religious or moral mandate, this can be extremely complex. What does it mean to be a Jewish, Catholic, Christian, or Seventh-day Adventist school? For those schools that believe in civic engagement, how will one measure the service learning components or the integration of civic values with online students, staff and faculty? Do those institutions that credit themselves with character development have a means to identify that development with the online community?

Questions for the Transfer of Culture

I have to this point posed a series of questions based upon the experiences and practices of traditional institutions. Granted, most of these questions have not been adequately answered even by these traditional institutions. They are ongoing and dynamic processes that transform themselves with each organization, community, program and subgroups. Further, the questions may actually differ for those schools that only exist

in cyber versions versus those who have no traditional counterparts. However, we must begin to ask the same questions about online learning communities and the experiences of educational processes in cyber formats.

Online Organizations-Exegetical Principles

Frequently educators have turned to the business community to look for models for educational processes and programs. Typically, these models have lacked many of the style components that are needed for the education sphere. Because education attempts to take on, not only a product affiliation, but a transformative process the corporate models are often a poor fit. Yet, as Baldrige & Deal (1983) have pointed out, "...there is no such thing as a special theory of change. Good organizational change theory is simply good organizational theory..." (p. 4). The application to educational institutions and the needs for change in these settings are more practical applications or hermeneutics than theoretical underpinnings. To this end I propose three exegetical principles:

1. School culture of traditional colleges and universities can tell us about some expectations of school culture online.
2. Corporate culture and the web can influence our understanding of service delivery and challenges for online education.
3. Our personal experience of online communication can inform our perceptions of online education.

In addition to these principles, Okham's Razor also applies. That is, as complicated as technology may seem, the simplest explanation still remains the most likely. I will assume the same for culture online.

Principle #1-School Culture of traditional Colleges and Universities Can Tell Us About Some Expectations of School Culture Online

Whether education is delivered in person or in an electronic forum, there are certain standards or dispositions that must be present. In the same way faculty and students in traditional classrooms must be prepared for class instruction, the same can be said for the online environment. Yoder (2003) points to appropriate preparation and planning, the encouragement of good writing skills, and using effective facilitation skills as just a few suggestions for the online learning community.

The need for social interaction, challenge and motivation in the learning environment, quality faculty and experiences with faculty, opportunities for research and expansion, and the ability to form relationships need to be present within the electronic community of learners. The style of these activities may change, but the substance of the contract remains intact.

Financial considerations are certainly a consideration for the online learner. In many cases, the costs for electronic courses can be well below the costs for their traditional counterparts. Even with the need to establish an infrastructure, the costs are far less than for buildings, housing and the like. In this category, the expectations of the online learner remain the same or similar as a traditional learner. The concern is to get an affordable education in the area desired at a reputable institution; one recognized by an employer or other educational institution.

The online learning community of today has based much of its marketing on the assumption that education, finances, availability and quality are the only or the top considerations.

Beyond the desire for education, many basic education schools and colleges and universities provide a social experience where one can find a group of friends or a significant other, depending upon the developmental stage of the student. To discount this perspective, even in an age when non-traditional students, married students, and more career minded students are attending classes would be to negate the experiences we see reported through so many social indicators. Beyond the ratings for best academic value, best teachers, top research institutions are the prized titles of best party school, most alcohol consumed, or best places to meet a mate. These categories are even further subdivided into specialty categories such as, "Reefer Madness, Lots of Hard Liquor, Lots of Beer, Major Frat and Sorority Scene or Stone-Cold Sober Schools, Don't Inhale, Scotch and Soda Hold the Ice, or Got Milk?" (*The Princeton Review*, retrieved from on March 17, 2004). One might suggest schools and universities provide social chat rooms, "lounges" and other even matching/mating services attempt to emulate the social expectations of their traditional counterparts.

Possible answers in providing some affiliation and loyalty is online games, Instant Messaging and other social interactions may teach us about online learning communities and culture. Cyberconsumers of every age are becoming more adept at online usage and with their proficiency comes greater online expectations. Television executives have already tapped avid viewers of popular programming by hosting focus groups and chat sessions with cast members. As online consumers of education become more accustomed to building personal relationships on line, colleges and universities will be challenged to provide more extensive venues for this type of interaction. Online institutions can and must engender loyalty.

Principle #2. Corporate culture and the web can influence our understanding of service delivery and challenges for online education.

Colleges and universities have had varying degrees of success in providing adequate solutions to the service demands of their clients. Course registration and library access are the most basic of functions, but ever-growing needs of students for financial information, textbooks, course information and support access are challenging even the most well resourced institutions. Beyond the practical nature of this service delivery is the nature of the cultural delivery in a corporate branding sense.

Dependent upon the institution, a student may never set foot on the traditional campus of a school. This does not mean the same student does not have the pride of affiliation for that institution. Schools with strong identities may draw as much from vicarious affiliation to the physical plant as some other traditional schools only hope to do at the main campus. Places with national reputations and popular sports programs reap the rewards of affiliation through product merchandising. Notre Dame hats and Texas A&M t-shirts are worn by more than a few of those who desire a connection to an institution they may never attend.

The online learning community could act as a strong affiliation link for those who are attracted to schools with such rich traditional heritages and identities. Being able to link one's self to a popular institution and thus, make oneself part of the community will fulfill needs that otherwise could not be fulfilled. The perils and possibilities of marketing in this arena are easily perceived.

One of the primary safety valves for maintaining a level of confidence in a school's "brand" or prestige is the criteria and scrutiny by which they accept or reject candidates. The concept of rigor, albeit not beautiful (personal correspondence with G. Shank, April 2004), provides a modicum of comfort from the fear that an electronic version of a college or university will be less demanding than its physical counterpart. Those who have taught or received instruction online can attest that in many cases, the specific demands required by the electronic medium in terms of attempting to set the correct tone, achieving satisfactory levels of communication and reaffirming one's understanding of material is often far more demanding than the traditional classroom. It is harder to hide in cyber space. And, yet, it is also harder to be known. One cannot know for sure that the person submitting material is, in fact, the same person each time. Until some electronic fingerprint is required for coursework, the risk of fraudulent activity is always present at the extreme. What sort of security mechanism do colleges and universities have in place to make sure online graduates are truly their graduates?

If concerns for identity and the need for selectivity and rigor seem to be the cynical side of the equation, the ability of online institutions to reach new populations of students is the more generous side. The electronic version of institutions can reach far beyond the grasp of traditional systems. Single parents, disabled people and the phobic of all types can enter into an environment that allows them the ability to negotiate the climate in friendlier terms. As the great equalizer of sorts, the online community takes away the biases of height, weight, age, dress, smell, beauty, girth, physical ability or other defining features that enhance or detract from one's appeal to an instructor or others. The very nature of the online forum, when not photographic in nature, requires judgment solely upon the online persona created by the user/student. A prison inmate, a quadriplegic, a middle class husband, or a traditional age undergraduate is each evaluated according to performance online, alone. The choice of what personal attributes to reveal remains the right of the user.

Students and teachers in basic education involved with Internet activities report: warmer and less adversarial relationships, students having increased motivation and teachers having an enhanced appreciation of students' capabilities (Schofield & Davidson, 2003, p. 72). If the same factors are transferable to higher education contexts, then the Internet and electronic experiences could define a culture in terms of new dimensions in relationships among learners.

Links to Heritage and Culture

One of the profound riches of online communications is the easy linkage to other sites. The new student to a university or institution at any level can be linked with ease to an institution's history, its defining symbols and even to sponsoring organizations. In many ways the online environment will provide more resources for its student, by giving them ready access to URLs that immediately address their queries about an organization's structure, traditions and beliefs. Online programs need to continue this tradition to help foster a sense of connectedness is sometimes lacking, especially from a traditional institution, onto whose campus a student may never set foot.

Traditional organizations use architecture and art to help foster an understanding of their mission. In cyber space, there may be the benefit of always having the chair you want for a class, but the aesthetics that surround our students electronically also have an important emphasis in learning. Cyber architects can develop the online architecture in such a way that access to events, programs and campus spaces help to develop a new style of environment that helps shape the uniqueness of the institution. Perhaps the area in which electronic resources can reinforce a school's identity most significantly is through the delivery of services.

The challenge now is to make sure the electronic services can live up to the stated intention of the institution. Just as traditional institutions need to train personnel in the unique vision of their school, so too the online environment must represent a delivery of services which is consistent with the mission. How are services provided that help to advance the diffusion of knowledge? Is there a respect for the integrity of electronic scholarship for tenure and retention or simply for delivery of courses? Is there a way to interweave the ethical, religious, mythical, or deep story of the institution into the electronic services?

The challenges faced by Catholic institutions in proving they are, indeed Catholic, is the same challenge we all face. How do we prove we are what our mission statement says we are? Will we require a service learning component to online learning? If so, how will we do that? Will religious schools require online retreats or provide cyberministry for their students to reinforce the vision and mission of the institution? These are solutions yet to be seen

Principle #3. Our personal experience of online communication can inform our perceptions of online education

Cyberspace has already begun the defining of its own culture. Emoticons, font usage, acronyms, synchronistic and asynchronistic chat, and the plethora of other indicators will continue to change with the advent of new technology. The threat is that this online culture may become generic. The experience of one university or school will be differentiated from that of another school only by the technology in use at the moment.

Beyond the sameness quality of online education, the access or digital divide issue may simply reinforce the factors already excluding those who might otherwise benefit most from rapidly changing technology. As technology advances, those who have been left behind will find themselves left further behind by online opportunities. The very populations whom could be newly reached may soon be unskilled or under skilled in the necessary tools for success. The online university may find its criteria being defined for it, not by finances or traditional educational background, but by the new fears and trepidations of the cyber age.

For many people of varying ages, online communication is fast, fun and easy. They have established new relationships, learned new skills and accessed information that would never have been accessible to them previously. The perceptions of online education may be as simple as one's positive or negative experiences with the online environment. The simplest answer is usually the best.

Conclusions

I opine any halo effect from an online program, if any, still results from its affiliation with a traditional program of repute. Oxford, Cambridge, or Harvard University Online does not carry the same weight as these same institutions in their traditional manifestation. This may not be the case for much longer. Perhaps, the issues I am raising of identity, tradition and charisma are, for some, the demons of traditional education they believe should be exorcised. However, our experience may serve us in the future of electronic education. That experience tells us we need to find a uniqueness to attract students and build alumni.

Many of the issues I have raised are concerns for web designers, engineers and graphic artists. It is important that schools, colleges and universities make sure that their online environments connect to their tradition, culture and charism as do their physical counterparts. Or, in the case of institutions with no traditional counterpart, they develop a culture that sets them apart as unique in the world of online learning. To accomplish this school president, directors of mission, folklorists and artists need to be involved in developing the electronic face of an institution.

We must develop communities of learners who continue to challenge each other. We must have faculties who will use the tools at their disposal to reach out to the changing populations of students. These faculty must provide opportunities for research and collaboration, beyond the confines of a course, if we are to develop true learning communities. We must welcome students and let them shape our communities in a dynamic and creative way if we are to develop an online culture that is sustainable and identifiable. In the end, it is relationship that will define the online culture.

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