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ACUPA: Exploring the Campus Policy Process

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to make an exploratory inquiry into the state of policy development processes in institutions of higher education, and to review the history and mission of the Association of College and University Policy Administrators (ACUPA). **Methodology:** Members of ACUPA were surveyed concerning their opinions of the status of policy development, and where the policy process was located in local governance structures. A survey was conducted of ACUPA membership in March and April 2005. **Results:** 24 institutions responded to the survey, half of them identifying themselves as Doctoral or Research Universities (Carnegie Classification, 2000). 75% of respondents rated their policy development processes as “average”, “above average”, or “very good”. 60% report to a President or Vice President. **Conclusions:** The results were inconclusive. There appeared to be a tendency for those who portrayed their policy process as “centralized” or “both” to rate their process more favorably than those who described their setting as “decentralized” or “disorganized.” Nearly 65% (9 of 14) of those who chose “centralized” or “both” rated their process either “very good” or “above average.” Even though this small survey sample had inconclusive results, it is a significant contribution to the literature in the field, which is scarce. **Recommendations:** This brief survey raised additional questions which need further research.

Persons who are interested in joining the network of policy administrators and developers ACUPA should view the web site at <http://www.acupa.org/> for more information.

There are many ways to approach policy development in higher education. We know because we have tried many of them. The “we” includes not only the authors of this article but those involved with policy development at various colleges and universities across the United States, Canada, and Australia.

The approaches used, summaries of top policy issues, model policies, and other related information has been collected on the web site of the Association of College and University Policy Administrators (ACUPA). The mission of the group is to explore both the policy process on college and university campuses as well as to discuss specific policy issues. The mission is fulfilled through periodic meetings, special events, outreach activities, and electronic communications among the membership.

This article will focus mainly on the process of developing policy. It will also touch on the background of those who call themselves policy developers and the issue of where they report within their organizational structure.

Some Background about ACUPA: From Email to Association

In 1994, a simple email by Joan (Slezak) Cutone at the University of Pittsburgh, looking for other colleges and universities who were trying to organize their policy and procedure information, got it all started. .

Since then, emails, phone calls and meetings have transpired by a number of interested schools and the Association of College and University Policy Administrators (ACUPA) was born. ACUPA is an informal network of professionals working in policy development and administrative areas of their institutions. No membership requirements or bylaws have been written.

Now, some of the best practices for managing the content of policy and procedure information are gathered on the ACUPA web site (<http://www.acupa.org/>). The web site has been established to reflect the views of the participants as well as offer opportunity for members to network and collaborate on research projects. The web site is published and maintained by the University of Minnesota (UM) Policy and Process Development Office. An ACUPA listserv (<http://process.umn.edu/acupa/acupalistserv.cfm>) is supported by University of Maryland-College Park, and is open for subscription by anyone interested.

Since that email and the banding together of the 15 charter members (listed below), the ACUPA email listserv has grown to 135 participants. Members of ACUPA typically find the organization through personal referral or internet searches.

Charter Members of ACUPA

1. Cornell University
2. Georgetown University
3. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
4. Mississippi State University
5. Penn State University
6. The Ohio State University

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| 7. The University of Arkansas | 12. University of Minnesota |
| 8. University of California, System | 13. University of New Mexico |
| 9. Indiana University | 14. University of Pittsburgh |
| 10. University of Maryland-College Park | 15. Yale University |
| 11. University of Michigan | |

Many of those members have worked to develop the contents of the current web site. Highlights of the current web site include:

- A generic process of policy development with best practices
- Case studies that describe how institutions developed policies
- A list of members by institution and name
- A list of members willing to give advice and consult on policy development
- Links to other policy resources

Current Policy Development Processes

During the various ACUPA emails and conferences, members constantly compare notes to seek improvement in how they develop policies and handle various policy development and administration issues. This is especially true for new members.

Upon a review of the authoritative resource for research in education, the ERIC Clearinghouse, little information was found on best practices and processes for policy development in higher education in either peer reviewed journal articles, or ERIC documents. Further, books published in this policy and procedure development tend to focus exclusively on organizations in the for-profit sector. In an era of increased focus on legal and regulatory compliance, it is surprising that research on models of policy development processes in higher education has not been published...

Higher education associations, think tanks, and policy organizations such as EDUCAUSE (www.educause.edu) have typically treated discussions of policy development framework in specific applications, such as in technology and information security.

ACUPA's research projects are developed based on the interests of members who volunteer to participate in conference call meetings. Issues raised in conference call meetings result in a synergy of efforts to investigate and disseminate the results to other participants.

This was the case during a conference call in early 2005, where some members decided to conduct a survey to determine opinions about policy development. There was also interest in finding out about the administrative reporting level of the policy function and the background of policy developers. The membership of the ACUPA listserv was surveyed in March-April 2005, and the results of that survey follow:

RESULTS OF SURVEY

Twenty-four institutions responded to the ACUPA survey on Institutional Policy Making – Offices & Processes. Half of the respondents identified their institution as a Doctoral or

Research University (Carnegie Classification, 2000). Of the remaining twelve schools, there was an even distribution across the other Carnegie Classifications (see below).

Which level best describes your institution?

| | | |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------|
| State System Administration | 3 | |
| Doctoral/Research | 12 | (one international) |
| Master’s Colleges and Universities | 3 | (one international) |
| Baccalaureate Colleges | 2 | |
| Associate’s Colleges | 4 | (one international) |
| Total | 24 | |

The crux of the survey asked policy developers to portray and rate their institution’s policy development process. The choices offered to describe their institution’s process were; centralized, decentralized, both, disorganized or other. The respondents then scored that policy process on a 5-point scale (very good, above average, average, needs improvement or very poor). There were no definitions associated with these choices.

There was a relatively equal distribution of how respondents described their institution’s policy development process. Approximately thirty percent of the respondents portrayed their policy process as “centralized,” while another 7, or 30%, chose “both.” Five policy developers (20%) saw their institutional policy process as “decentralized.” The remaining 20% of the respondents selected either “Disorganized” (3) or “other” (2).

The ratings of these institutional processes varied. Half of the respondents gave their institution’s policy development process a favorable rating of either “very good” (5) or “above average” (7). Six policy makers rated their school’s method as “average” while the other 25% of the policy makers believed their institution’s process “needs improvement.” None of the 24 respondents rated their policy development process as “very poor.” The chart A (below) illustrates how respondents portrayed and rated their institution’s process.

A: Rating of policy development process

| | | Very Good | Above Average | Average | Needs Improvement | Very Poor |
|--------------------------------|---------------|-----------|------------------------------|---------|-------------------|-----------|
| <i>Portrayal of the policy</i> | Centralized | 3 | 2 | 2 | | |
| | Decentralized | | 1 (moving to centralized) | 1 | 3 | |
| | Both | 1 | 3 | 3 | | |

| | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| | Disorganized | | | | 3 | |
| | Other | 1 (shared governance) | 1 (moving to centralized) | | | |

Policy Developers and Where They Report

The ACUPA membership comprises all sizes and classifications of colleges and universities, and developers of the survey were curious about their collective selves. They wanted to know if there were discernable patterns regarding the professional background of policy developers and where policy offices reported in their organizational structure.

Nearly half (42%) of the respondents described their primary work background as “Administrative.” While there were no self-identified academicians or human resource professional in the group, the other 15 respondents acknowledged seven other functional areas (see below).

Policy developers’ primary background

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Academic | 0 |
| Administrative | 11 |
| Archivist | 1 |
| Finance | 3 |
| Human Resources | 0 |
| Legal | 4 |
| Student Affairs | 1 |
| Technology | 4 |
| Other | 2 (Project Management; Public Administration/Policy) |
| | 26 (some persons identified two areas) |

Within their respective institutions, the survey asked, “At what (governance) level does your policy function report?” Sixty percent (15) said they report to a Vice President or Vice Provost. Seven people reported to the organization’s leadership, either a Chancellor/Vice Chancellor (in a state system administration) or President (on a traditional campus).

Administrative reporting level

| | |
|-----------------------------|----------|
| Chancellor/ Vice Chancellor | 3 |
| President | 4 |
| Vice President | 8 |
| Assoc/Asst VP | 5 |
| Assoc/Asst/V Provost | 1 |
| Other | 4 |

Total **25**
(one institution reported dual reporting lines)

CONCLUSIONS

Due to the small number of respondents, the survey format, and the ambiguity of some answers to survey questions; it is difficult, and probably unwise, to draw conclusions. However, there appeared to be a tendency for those who portrayed their policy process as “centralized” or “both” to rate their process more favorably than those who described their setting as “decentralized” or “disorganized.” Nearly 65% (9 of 14) of those who chose “centralized” or “both” rated their process either “very good” or “above average.” Conversely, 6 out of 8 policy developers working in a “decentralized” or “disorganized” process believed their situation “needed improvement”.

The survey results do suggest that the area of higher education policy development processes and administrative requires further research. We have identified the following questions for further investigation:

1. Is there a precise, commonly agreed upon definition of policy development process types (centralized, decentralized, etc.);
2. is there a commonly agreed upon criteria of what makes a process “effective;”
3. how and why policy developers view the effectiveness of their institutional policy process; and
4. is there a correlation between:
 - type of policy development process and perceived effectiveness;
 - institutional type and process type;
 - institutional type and perceived process effectiveness; or
 - reporting level and perceived process effectiveness?

While the numbers regarding the policy developers’ primary background suggest that there might not be definitive path to becoming policy developer, for the reasons stated earlier, conclusions are problematical. Since there may have been some inherent assumptions in the survey (e.g., all respondents were policy developers working within a delineated policy office) additional examinations should gather information about:

1. FTE policy positions (title, duties, is this full-time, etc.);
2. how people came to be in this position;
3. the history of the policy position (date created, why, etc); and
4. do people work in a defined policy office and if not,
 - a. where do they reside; and
 - b. the history of the policy office (date created, why, etc).

Consider Joining ACUPA

If you have some responsibility for developing policy at your institution, visit the web site and consider joining ACUPA by joining the listserv. Instructions are published at <http://process.umn.edu/acupa/acupalistserv.cfm>. New members are always welcome and your approach to developing policy or work on policy issues will add to our current body of knowledge.

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