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Learning for Organizing: Institutional Reading Groups as a Strategy for Change

Abstract

Organizing for learning is an important emphasis for AAHE, and rightly so. Colleges and universities should make institutional changes that promote better and more effective learning. Our experiences — from a national perspective at the American Council on Education (ACE) and ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education and from a campus-based perspective at Portland State University — suggest that before institutions can organize for learning, they must first learn for organizing.

Disciplines

Community College Education Administration | Community College Leadership | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Leadership | Education Economics | Higher Education | Higher Education Administration | Teacher Education and Professional Development

Learning for Organizing

Institutional Reading Groups as a Strategy for Change

By Peter Eckel, Adrianna Kezar, and Devorah Lieberman



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Organizing for learning is an important emphasis for AAHE, and rightly so. Colleges and universities should make institutional changes that promote better and more effective learning. Our experiences — from a national perspective at the American Council on Education (ACE) and ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education and from a campus-based perspective at Portland State University — suggest that before institutions can organize for learning, they must first learn for organizing.

As requisite to making the desired changes, academic leaders need the knowledge and the institutional commitment to implement their plans. This article presents one possible implementation strategy — organizing campus reading groups. (Although the focus here is using reading groups as a strategy for institutional change, it is an effective strategy at other times and in other types of decisions as well.)

A Structure for Change

Many campuses are initiating reading groups, the goal of which is to explore a topic in depth through a review of the pertinent literature and research and focused discussions. The groups provide campuses with a common language and knowledge base about a particular issue, such as faculty workload, community service-learning, or even the purposes of higher education. Creating a campus reading group is an intentional strategy to manage information related to the challenges campuses face, master important knowledge, and involve key people

in the change process. Such groups help create an atmosphere of reflection, inquiry, and learning.

Reading groups and being familiar with the literature are important not only for providing information but also because they create a *process* of bringing people together for focused discussion and inquiry. Reading groups focus collective attention; highlight specific elements in ambiguous contexts; bring people together who otherwise might not interact — let alone problem solve; uncover institutional assumptions, perspectives, priorities, and biases; and raise awareness of differing interpretations of events. They educate on many levels.

The Challenges of Using Reading Groups

The heart of reading groups is an organized examination of key literature. Although seemingly straightforward, this process of identifying, prioritizing, and synthesizing the vast literature (in higher education and beyond) and acting on new knowledge is a challenge.

If reading groups seem like good ideas, why don't more campuses draw upon the literature and use reading groups in a systematic way? A study of practitioners and their use of the higher education literature helps answer those questions. Over three years, the staff at the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education conducted focus groups of department chairs and deans, institutional researchers, student affairs officers, mid-level academic administrators, and administrators from other areas such as

alumni affairs, development, or associations (see box, page 8). They learned:

- Most academic decision makers do not make decisions informed by the literature (although they acknowledge they should or would like to) because it takes time; the literature is perceived to be of little value and inaccessible; and there is no institutional incentive to do so.
- The higher education literature was so vast that people did not know what it contained. When one adds potentially useful literature from outside higher education, such as business and management, psychology, or sociology, the problem became even more overwhelming.
- Respondents did not have strategies to effectively review the pertinent information or to quickly distinguish between high- and low-quality literature.

Formats of Reading Groups

The ERIC study and the American Council on Education's Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation (see box, page 8) suggest several structures for reading groups. The following list gives several examples. Campus examples illustrate some of the strategies used by institutions in the ACE Project.

Focused conversations. Discussions among 10 to 30 individuals from across the campus, these groups typically included faculty and administrators and, depending on the campus culture and norms and on the topic, students, board members, and alumni. Participants receive a common set of readings to frame the discussion and raise questions. Focused conversations vary in length and may be led by a facilitator who summarizes major points, pushes those involved to think more deeply, and avoids conversational dead ends.

For example, leaders at Valencia Community College conducted a series of 12 half-day conversations in which nearly 300 faculty and staff participated to help shape and make progress on its change initiative, "Collaborating to Become a More Learning-Centered Institution." All of the comments from these dialogues were compiled and circulated collegewide, and all faculty and staff were asked to comment.

Retreats. Typically spread out over a weekend and held off-campus, retreats provide time away from daily worries to concentrate on larger issues, and may be useful opportunities for reading groups. Retreats may follow a range of formats, from highly structured agendas to nearly open ones that are created by participants.

The University of Puerto Rico-Rio Piedras held two weekend retreats at strategic points in its change initiative, "Reconceptualizing the Baccalaureate Experience." The retreats were structured to give its faculty and administrators extended time and comfort to do their work. As part of the retreats, participants responded to working papers prepared by a faculty-led task force.

Seminars. Seminars mirror a format of an academic course, but for faculty and administrators. They have a structured curriculum and reading list. Organizers may write discussion papers for seminar participants or for the campus community. Because such seminars are a scholarly process, they draw on the participants' sophisticated skills and strengths, which allows them to explore new questions in familiar ways and lends intellectual substance to the change agenda. Seminars may take place over a few intensive weekends or be spread out over the semester.

Symposia. These campuswide conversations typically include a prominent speaker or speakers, materials written by the presenters distributed beforehand, and some type of facilitated conversations. The speakers and their writings provoke ideas and catalyze thinking; the follow-up conversations allow participants to further explore ideas and implications.

Leaders at Stephen F. Austin University sponsored three campuswide symposia related to its change agenda, "Revitalizing Faculty, Staff, and Administration." Each symposium featured a nationally prominent speaker to address the faculty, then, following the speech, organizers held small group conversations to discuss ideas provoked by the speaker. Summaries of the forums were posted on the institution's website to continue the exchange on an electronic posting page.

Town meetings. The entire community is provided with a set of common framing readings and invited to participate in these open events. Olivet College held a town meeting to craft its "Campus Compact," a guiding statement for the college related to its institutional change initiative, "Education for Individual and Social Responsibility." The day-long meeting, held in the gymnasium, involved students, faculty, staff, and trustees (approximately 250 people in all) to further define the institution's direction and to formulate a set of principles about what it means to be a responsible member of the college community.

Reading Groups in Action

Portland State University (one of the institutions in

A A H E B u l l e t i n

the ACE Project) used reading groups as a cornerstone of its change efforts. Fifteen faculty and administrators were invited by the provost to organize as a reading group to begin implementing PSU's change agenda, "Developing Faculty for the Urban University of the 21st Century." For the first year, the provost facilitated monthly meetings and assigned articles and books that led the group toward a common vocabulary and understanding of higher education and the changing roles of

group was to put the recently articulated strategic direction of PSU — becoming an urban institution — in a broader context. Thirty faculty and staff participated in this series and, in follow-up interviews, said that participation significantly deepened their understanding of PSU's choices about its strategic direction. In particular, participants expressed great appreciation of the broad coverage the provost paid to the history of higher education, which connected the institution's current challenges to historic trends.

PSU repeated the series the following year for a new cohort of 30 faculty and staff. Due to the number of requests for repeat sessions, the institution also videotaped the sessions.

PSU's reading groups provided the foundation for the institution's new Center for Academic Excellence. Many of the suggested outcomes of the original reading groups were threaded into the activities of the center.

Resources

The American Council on Education is in its fifth and final year of the Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation. The insights from this project, which has involved 26 diverse colleges and universities working on institutional change, underpin some of the ideas presented here. Additional project lessons can be found in an occasional paper series, *On Change*, available through ACE Fulfillment Services, Department 191, Washington, DC 20055-0191, 301/604-9073; and online in PDF versions from ACE's bookstore website (www.acenet.edu).

Further information on the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education focus groups can be found in the chapter by Adrianna Kezar, titled "Still Trees Without Fruit: Higher Education Research at the Millennium," in the forthcoming *New Directions for Higher Education* monograph edited by her and Peter Eckel and published by Jossey-Bass. The Clearinghouse website (www.eriche.org) contains additional valuable information on the effective use of higher education literature.

faculty. The goal of the effort was to develop a comprehensive strategy for the university to develop its faculty to fulfill its mission as an urban institution.

Over the course of the year, reading group members participated in intellectual discussions about faculty life in the academy. The monthly three-hour discussions created meaningful opportunities for faculty and mid-level administrators to be in conversations with institutional decision makers. The readings provided equal footings for the conversations and the format minimized grandstanding common to other settings where institutional decisions are made jointly.

At the end of the first year, through a series of readings and conversations, the reading group members identified themes they believed the institution needed to address. The reading group then formed subgroups for each theme. Each subgroup leader then recruited other faculty and administrators to participate in second-generation reading groups. Comments and recommendations from subgroups' conversations became the foundation for the next fall's faculty symposium.

Third-generation reading group. Many of the readings for the original reading group became the foundation for a third-generation, year-long reading group led by the provost. The primary objective of this

Conclusion

The PSU reading group provided a scholarly forum to discuss campus issues that were not necessarily related to any one member's personal agenda, and the readings provided a context in which to struggle with issues related to the changes facing the university. Colleagues listen to each other more and reading group members formed a sense of respect for each other that carried throughout the initial reading group and beyond.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of reading groups as an important strategy for learning for organizing, an adaptation of AAHE's concept of organizing for learning. By reversing the words, the phrase adopts new meaning and offers a new set of principles for institutions concerned with improving their teaching and learning.

The challenge for institutions is to benefit from the good thinking of others that can shape not only what they plan on doing but the processes through which they will go about it. By having a firm footing in the literature related to their challenge at hand, institutional change leaders can benefit from the thought and scholarship of others. The intent of reading groups is to create an ethos on campus of inquiry, application, and reflection that will ultimately benefit the campus, and its students. Harry Truman captured the essence of the faculty experience in reading groups when he said, "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts."

