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Uncovering Issues with Coordination and the Impact on Mission Implementation

As part of the process of self-study at the College of Saint Benedict (CSB) and Saint John's University (SJU), the authors explored issues surrounding the coordinate relationship and resultant perceptions of the institutional missions. What emerged from focus group interviews across these campuses were the identification of stakeholder tensions around the interpretation and implementation of the missions due in no small part to the coordinate relationship.

Mission clarity, understanding, and pervasive support are critically important to institutional success (Higher Learning Commission, 2003), as these elements provide a unifying vision for any organization. A clearly defined mission should promote a cohesive framework for launching organizational priorities (Velcoff & Ferrari, 2006). This “mission imperative” is evident in the standards for institutional accreditation set forth by the Higher Learning Commission. Everything an institution does, including teaching and learning, research, planning, finances, community service, student development, and so forth, must be aligned with that institution’s publicly articulated mission.

A survey of mission and integrity conducted across these campuses ($N = 777$) in early spring of 2007 affirmed the missions of the institutions are clear, understood, supported, and publicly articulated. Missing from this survey were perceptions and experiences with mission interpretation and implementation, two critical components that are commonly contested (Weiss & Piderit, 1999). Based on the preliminary mission and integrity survey results and the literature indicating pervasive challenges to mission interpretation and implementation, the authors set out to explore such issues specific to CSB and SJU. Do we perceive our missions to be consistently interpreted and implemented on these campuses?

For the sake of brevity, this paper describes findings on mission interpretation and implementation based on focus group interviews. The paper does not expand on other aspects of the self-study completed during the process of seeking continued accreditation. A more complete picture of institutional effectiveness can be found in the accreditation self-study report and at the colleges’ accreditation website at www.csbsju.edu/2008accreditation.

Methodology

A series of semi-structured focus group interviews with faculty, staff, CSB students, SJU students, and administrators were conducted during the spring of 2007 after approval from the relevant Institutional Review Board. Participants were selected via recommendations from the CSB/SJU accreditation self-study steering committee and then clustered into groups of five to ten participants based on role. A 2-hour focus group interview was conducted with each of the five groups. The questioning line (see Appendix) guided the interviews, which were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analyzed by four independent readers (two faculty members and two students). Themes and illustrative quotations were identified by each of these readers. Findings were organized first by issues of interpretation and second by issues of implementation. Summaries were then compiled into a final composite report.

Findings

Interpretation

Interpreting the mission generated tensions across the five focus groups, particularly with regard to upholding Catholic traditions in a liberal arts setting. These mostly involved the tug-of-war inherent in a 150-year religious tradition in conflict with perceived contemporary realities and open discourse within the liberal arts tradition. Tensions were fueled by the need to remain sustainable and viable institutions, while marketing ourselves to a secular society. One participant noted:

But really, when we're approaching donors or funders for all kinds of different opportunities on campus, we are very clear sometimes about minimizing Catholicism if we think the donor will view that as too religious. So it's a very not-so-subtle way of selling ourselves differently depending upon how we think the donor will interpret us.

CSB students recognized conflicts with Catholicism and the need for support with issues of sexuality and contraception, pregnancy among unwed students, conflicts with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender lifestyles, and Church-based gender inequities. In a liberal arts setting, the student expected open and candid discussions about all of these issues. Catholicism in a liberal arts setting was also a critical discussion point among the administrator focus group as, one participant noted:

In a very simplistic term, I tend to look at the lowercase "c" as the liberal arts aspects and the Catholic with a capital "C" is more of the Benedictine, the monastic, which is those types of attributes [needed to exemplify] the Catholic university tradition. So you could say, Catholic [prevents supporting] certain

issues ... whereas with the lowercase “c” liberal arts, it’s encouraged to discuss them.

Similarly, others discussed the difficulties of marketing the institutions to a range of constituents, internal and external, aligned with the mission and yet with a high level of public acceptability:

About 4 or 5 years ago we started planning our re-marketing, looking at the graphic representations of the logo and kind of instituting [that] we are Catholic, first and foremost that’s who we are, and how that’s interpreted is what, in my mind, is the question. But there were comments about, “well, geez, we don’t want that logo because it’s awfully Catholic or it’s awfully religious.” Well, we are.

That same participant continued by expressing reconciliation of this tension:

But during that whole process [of developing a new logo] there were a lot of focus groups with current students, graduates, parents, faculty, staff, alums, across the board. And the majority of them referenced the spiritual and I think that’s one of the reasons again that we have been successful. It’s because we offer this grounded framework that’s loose enough that no matter what religion or what your spiritual inclination is, you find it.

Not surprisingly, Catholic tensions were mediated by the more universal acceptance of the Benedictine values, perceived as relevant across all faith beliefs. Despite tensions expressed related to Catholicism as a major mission element, no one suggested removing the Benedictine values or Catholic traditions or the liberal arts as key components of institutional mission.

Implementation

According to all five focus groups, implementation of the missions was complicated by trying to achieve the missions within a coordinate relationship. This was based on the logistical realities of coordination, particularly with regard to communication and fulfillment of certain parts of the missions, notably gender and diversity. The focus groups readily expressed frustrations with coordination. They identified confusion with having three mission statements (CSB, SJU, and coordinate). The implementation of the missions was often equated to the marriage of two different people bringing a blended family together, each coming to the relationship with a flock of children, separate agendas, and unequal checkbooks.

Logistical issues were pervasive and voiced across all focus group interviews. The frustrations of mission implementation in a coordinate relationship were expressed clearly by one participant who noted:

Trying to maneuver between the different needs and wants of two institutions, whether it's the boards, presidents, VPs, directors, whatever, all the way down, it gets difficult at times because there are two of these places with their own needs, wants, desires, and have to haves, and what happens is it falls to the individuals on the campuses to determine how to make [the missions] work. I think that's the big issue.

A few participants identified confusion about how to prioritize activities in a coordinate environment, sometimes as a result of two presidents or other institutional leaders with occasionally conflicting agendas. There was a comment made by one participant that the only way to survive at CSB and SJU is to have a high tolerance for ambiguity. The needed investment was illustrated by one participant who noted, "I can imagine that the single entity, trying to deal with the single entity on the opposite campus also has its difficulties. But there is a price that we pay for this arrangement and it's fairly expensive, both in terms of dollars and energy."

Part of the energy expenditure was sorting out three mission statements. Among faculty participants, subtle differences were identified among the separate and coordinate mission statements, such as references to gender, cultural diversity, and prayer. These differences were a source of confusion when speaking in support of the mission, particularly in the process of applying for promotion or tenure. According to a faculty participant, "I think it really comes back to the question of coordination of the two schools. We have three different mission documents here. I think the one thing I would change to start with is to have a single mission."

Implementation of the missions was challenged by communication issues inherent in a coordinate relationship as well. Staff participants were confused about "which mission to pay attention to" and some expressed dissatisfaction with being excluded from institutional decision-making processes, particularly in those situations where the work environment was directly impacted, such as whether or not their area was becoming "joint." For one participant,

I watch people just working so hard to do their best and to really do right for their students. And I think administrators are doing that too. Everybody's trying so hard to do the right thing. I think they really care about the success of the whole place and their relationship to each other but there's this piece missing, which is, you know, really good communication between all the parts.

Through the process of self-study, it has become clearer to us that although it appears we have multiple mission statements we actually have one set of coherent "missions": very best, residential, liberal arts, education, and Catholic university tradition. Although these missions are fundamentally the same, the separate *identities* of CSB and SJU brought forth discussions about differences in structure and processes of governance, finance, employee benefits, maintenance, student housing, and security. All

groups, including the students, recognized differences in incorporation, structure, and relationships with the monasteries as contributing factors to inequalities and tensions between the two campuses. Students indicated that greater cooperation was needed — especially in the financial and housing areas — if coordination was going to work. According to one student, “It seems to me that the areas of campus life here that function best are the areas that are merged. The academic programs seem to be working with the provost and registrar’s office, academic advising, and student activities.” It was also noted by the administrator group that the move to a single chief academic officer was successful in promoting a unified identity for the academic operation.

Although the academic program successes resulting from coordination were commonly discussed across the focus groups, participants were still unclear on how to focus on specific needs of men and women while still maintaining a viable coordinate relationship. One administrative participant viewed the ever-expanding increases in shared programming and joint departments as “eroding” attention from the specific needs of men and women. As one participant stated, “I’m a little unclear on the emphasis on personal growth of men and women. I’m not sure how we divide that out anymore or how that piece works as we move forward [in a coordinate relationship].” Likewise, promoting the schools to prospective students was also identified as an area where the emphasis on the separate identities of the institutions was minimized. Another participant noted:

[As we become more joint], the harder it is for me to say to people coming in that this is a specifically gendered institution because, you know, if you go to admissions counselors they’ll say, “oh, yeah, St. John’s is a male institution, St. Ben’s is female but they are six miles apart and if you are on campus, there’s no real difference.”

Faculty participants discussed the equality of men and women on campus and recognized how this is challenged by the gender inequality within the Catholic Church. This concern was mirrored by staff participant perceptions of inequality between the two institutions. CSB staff members were concerned about the lower visibility and prestige of CSB as compared to SJU. CSB students were concerned that SJU’s “university” label overshadowed CSB’s “college” label and that this difference may result in reduced employment or graduate school opportunities.

Overall, participants supported the idea of attending to the specific needs of men and women but displayed an air of discontent with how to fully act on that mission element when there was an erosion of institutional identity as a men’s college and a women’s college due in no small part to the evolution of the coordinate relationship.

The focus groups all recognized that significant progress was being made in efforts to expand the definition of diversity and to attract and retain qualified diverse stu-

dents. The tensions rose when discussing the perceived lack of support once these diverse students arrive on these campuses and the difficulties experienced by students when interfacing with the surrounding communities. As one student noted:

I think that what St. Ben's and St. John's do is they paint this picture of students of other cultures. "We have all this diversity. You should come." But then when people come, it's like, "okay, you're on your own."

The I-Lead program was discussed as a major influence on the effective recruitment and retention of diverse students to these campuses. However, all groups recognized that this wasn't nearly enough. For one participant,

Simply developing a program doesn't undo a century and a half of culture at these institutions of upper-middle class white people going here. So I think something needs to be done not only to recruit students but to demonstrate to them that they will find an atmosphere here that is not only diverse on paper and in our admissions brochures, but is also supportive of a real kind of inter-cultural sharing of experience.

Administrative participants indicated that the institutions really need to focus on acceptance and a greater fulfillment of Benedictine values in supporting diverse students. Students appreciated that many on campus were attentive to diversity issues but increased support for diverse students was essential.

Conclusions

Examining institutional mission and integrity is a fundamental step in the process of accreditation. A major strength of these institutions is mission understanding, support, and adherence. That is not to say that the mission is unexamined. The depth of responses and the passion with which these focus group participants spoke of the mission elements demonstrate significant integrity. The groups recognized that the motivation behind the tension is the effort to do what is best for students and to present ourselves in the best light to students, parents, alums, and the larger community.

Some would argue that colleges and universities often rely on institutional mission to drive distinctiveness. However, "distinctiveness derives more from execution than from mission, more from what a college does and less from what it purports to be" (Chait, 1979, p. 957). Therefore, what is more distinctive than the fundamental mission elements *very best, residential, liberal arts, education, and Catholic university tradition* is our interpretation and implementation of those missions, particularly through the intensive work of coordination. Being coordinate is not our mission but conducting the mission in cooperation can be viewed as our way to fulfill the mission more efficiently, thoughtfully, and ultimately more effectively.

Carie Braun is an Associate Professor of Nursing. Philip Kramer is Director of Academic Assessment. Both served on the 2008 Accreditation Self-Study Steering Committee from 2006 to 2008.

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Appendix

Mission and Integrity Focus Group/Interview Questioning Line

1. To what extent is the coordinate mission of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University clear? To what extent does the mission publicly articulate the institutions' commitments? What are the specific issues you identify with the mission? If you could change the mission, what would you change? Explain.
2. Give some examples of activities that you have seen on campus that are consistent or not consistent with the coordinate mission. Do you believe that we do what we say we do? Explain.
3. To what extent do the people at CSB/SJU act with integrity? What are the specific issues you identify with the integrity of the institutions? To what extent do we present ourselves accurately and honestly to the public? Explain.
4. St. Ben's and St. John's are in a coordinate relationship. This means that the two institutions have maintained separate identities but share one academic program and many services across both campuses. What issues do you identify with the coordinate relationship? How would you like to see the coordinate relationship evolve over the next 5–10 years? Why do you think CSB and SJU have maintained separate identities?
5. What issues do you identify with diversity in the coordinate mission? What can we do to improve our attention to diversity and activities that support student learning in a diverse society?
6. To what extent does the coordinate mission and learning goals include a strong commitment to high academic standards that sustain and advance excellence in higher learning? What examples can you identify of this commitment or a lack of commitment?
7. What are the most important issues that should be addressed as we prepare for continued accreditation? Explain why you think these issues are important and should be addressed.