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Expectations and Experiences with Teaching Women at a Private College in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: The focus of this research is to understand the expectations of faculty and administration at Effat College in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. I assessed the college's current status to understand ways to "improve the quality of education at the school" by interviewing the faculty and administration about how they saw the roles. I sought to identify and understand the many issues facing this newly established college in order to build upon its strengths and support its growth and future success. As the college was still developing policies, procedures, and systems, the faculty—mostly expatriate teachers—were very uncomfortable because the expectations and experiences differed significantly between faculty and administration.

Introduction

In September 1999, the first private women's college was established in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Named for the queen who brought education for females to Saudi Arabia in 1955, the college promotes her vision of education: "The College, in keeping with the Islamic quest for knowledge is committed to being a leader in providing academic excellence and professional development."

Queen Effat's daughters continue the quest to improve woman's education and they founded Effat College and endowed it with 1/3 of the Queen's personal fortune from a family foundation. An American woman with ties to Swarthmore College acted as the first dean and established "an Islamic liberal arts college" in Saudi Arabia. With the support of the royal family, she was able to bypass much of the bureaucracy that goes into creating institutions and got the College up and running in 4 weeks with 38 students for 2 majors (Brévart-Demm, 2002). Currently, the college has 200 students studying in five majors: early childhood education, computer science, information systems, English and rhetoric, and educational psychology. The first class of 9 students graduated June 18, 2003.

The students come from various backgrounds—different nationalities, social strata (middle and upper classes), and ability levels. In Saudi Arabia, about 30% of the population consists of expatriate workers from across the world. Only the children of Saudi fathers are allowed to attend the Saudi public university system, so many talented non-Saudi students were glad to attend a college in Saudi Arabia. These students often majored in Computer Science or Information Systems and achieved a level of knowledge and skills that would enable them to have a career. Other students either had gotten married before studying and saw this college as an opportunity to now get their degree or had not qualified to enter the public university system and came to Effat as a second choice. A number of students also saw the college experience as a

89

way to socialize with other women outside of the confines of their home. These girls were often the wealthiest and considered the courses to be a forum for entertainment, not for learning.

During the spring of 2002, I served as Director of Continuing Education for Academic Programs and as faculty in Educational Psychology at Effat College. As part of my position, I was asked to work on a project evaluating the teaching and learning at the college. From my work in collaboration, I recognized that before we could undertake this evaluation, we needed to clarify our terms and define our goals and criteria (Glowacki-Dudka, 1999). Therefore, I undertook an assessment of the college to understand its current status, in order to "improve the quality of education at the school" (as suggested by the dean). There were many issues facing this newly established college. I sought to understand them, build upon the strengths, and support its growth and future success.

Methodology

Research Questions

Coming in new to this setting, I explored a variety of research questions, such as: Who are the players within this college (administrators, faculty, staff, students)? What is the relationship between these players (interactions, respect, communication)? What is the level of education currently promoted at this college? How can this relationship improve and support the students' quality of education? Where are the strengths and weaknesses within this institution? How should faculty be assessed and developed?

Data Sources and Analysis Methods

This study was completed in four phases. In the first phase, I held two focus groups, one with the five faculty supervisors and another with the six members of the administration team in order to develop a pyramid of skills and competencies to represent the ideal for graduates from this college. Once the pyramid was established, it became a point from which to interview the teachers about their teaching style, philosophy, and methods. In the second phase, I surveyed all the professional staff in order to clarify the expectations that administration and faculty hold of each other and the students. The survey consisted of lists of expected activities for each group should attend to and each individual was asked to rank the top 10 activities. I then compiled them and compared the responses between faculty and administration. The third phase was to survey the students as to their goals and experiences at the college. Of the 190 students at college 42 returned the survey. The results were compiled and analyzed for trends. The fourth and final phase of this process was to interview the faculty as to their expectations and experiences teaching the students and working at the college. I interviewed 34 faculty members who tutor students and teach courses at the College. The interview questions included the following: What brought you to Effat College? What do you see as your role or contribution to the work here at Effat College? What surprised you when you began to work with the students here at Effat College? What is your preferred style of teaching and learning? Looking at the Pyramid of Skills, which skills do you focus on in your classes? Which skills do you spend most of your time teaching? How do you incorporate these types of skills into your classes? How do you measure your students considering these skills? What would help you to work with your students to improve their core learning skills? What recommendations do you have for improving the teaching and learning that occurs here? In your mind what is an event that should prompt an observation or other response for evaluation purposes?
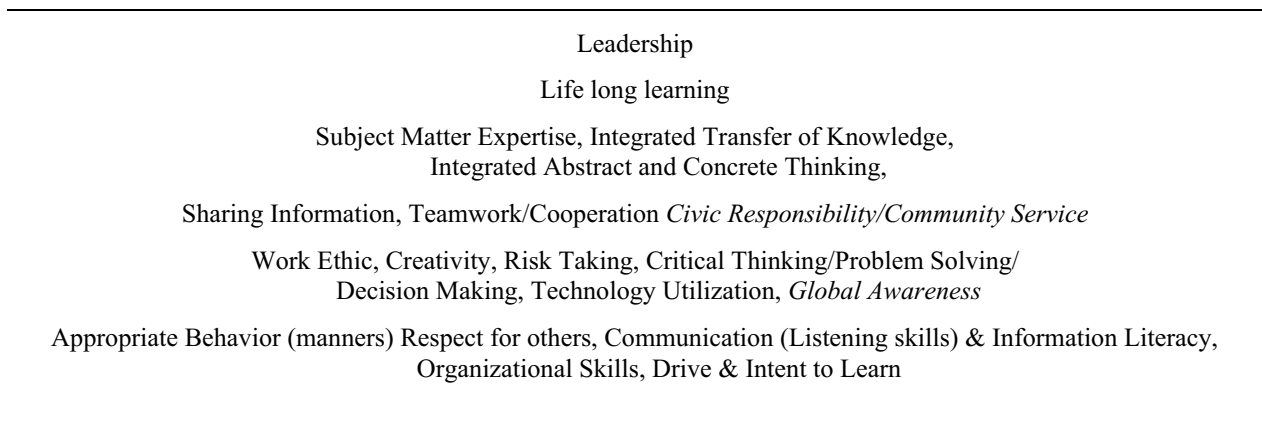
I used the model of quality proposed by Haworth and Conrad (1997) as a reference point for this evaluation. Haworth and Conrad propose an "Engagement Theory of Program Quality" for higher education with five clusters or important inputs: (a) diverse and engaged participants (faculty, students, and leaders), (b) participatory cultures (shared program direction, a community of learners, and a risk-taking environment), (c) interactive teaching and learning (critical dialogue, integrative learning, mentoring, cooperative peer learning, and out-of-class activities), (d) connected program requirements (planned course work, professional residency, and tangible products), and e) adequate resources (support for students, faculty, and basic infrastructure) (Haworth and Conrad 1997, p.xiii). Each cluster builds on the others and works together toward a complete program. This model articulates the factors that create and support a quality program in higher education; therefore, I could compare the activities at Effat with the model to identify strengths and points for improvement.

Findings and Discussion

This section focuses on the expectations of students, faculty, and administration and their responses about working at the college through the Engagement Theory lens.

Expectations of the Students

During the first phase of this study, faculty and administration met in two separate groups. Building on previous work and Queen's vision of the college, we determined desired skills and competencies for students upon completion of their education here at Effat College. See Figure 1.

Leadership

Life long learning

Subject Matter Expertise, Integrated Transfer of Knowledge,
Integrated Abstract and Concrete Thinking,

Sharing Information, Teamwork/Cooperation *Civic Responsibility/Community Service*

Work Ethic, Creativity, Risk Taking, Critical Thinking/Problem Solving/
Decision Making, Technology Utilization, *Global Awareness*

Appropriate Behavior (manners) Respect for others, Communication (Listening skills) & Information Literacy,
Organizational Skills, Drive & Intent to Learn

Figure 1: Pyramid of Skills and Competencies

This pyramid may look somewhat familiar to other hierarchical models of learning goals used in liberal arts colleges in the West; yet, when applied in a Saudi context this model reaches beyond the scope of what is familiar for many of the students. The Saudi school system is based on memorization. Students learn reading, writing, math, and religious teachings, but not history, geography, or current events- except what is found in their faith. More importantly they are expected to simply memorize and follow along without questioning why. Effat College is attempting to change the definition of education from memorization to "critical thinking" and

"leadership." Freire (1973/1994) warns that at some point in "closed societies . . . new facts occur which provoke the first attempts at self-awareness, whereupon a new cultural climate begins to form" (p. 13). This college sought to provide an opportunity for women to start to "problematize" their reality and lead their nation into a new era.

In phase three of the study, when surveyed about plans after graduation 65% (26 of 40) of students responded that they planned to begin a career or go to work; 27.5% (11) planned to enter graduate school somewhere other than Jeddah (preferably London); and 15% (6) planned to get married. When asked later, some students explained that with a degree, they would have more say about who they would marry and many had already refused arranged marriages. Without an education or career prospects, women in Saudi Arabia often do not have enough status to refuse the engagement, and they must marry the person their family selects.

Faculty and Administration Relationships

In addressing the research question about who are the players of the college, the data suggested that power dynamics worked at many levels. The faculty and administration at Effat College seemed to support the "diverse and engaged participants" cluster of the Haworth and Conrad's model. To begin with, the players within this college (administrators, faculty, staff, and students) come from many different nations and cultures. The first dean was American and therefore staffed her administration team with white, women born in the United States who held "liberal arts values." When the Saudi dean took over in the fall of 2000, she sought to bring more Saudi (or Arab) women onto the team. While I was there, the dean and her two assistants were Saudi, with graduate degrees from the United States, while the other vice-deans (business, HR, librarian, and advisory) were American women with experience in higher education, and one position (the academic vice-dean) was vacant. The faculty was from all across the world, both East and West, Islamic and non-Islamic nations. While most of the administration team members held Ph.D.s, most of the faculty held Master's Degrees or less. While the faculty and administration were very diverse and brought much strength to the college, nothing was done to unite the faculty or build on the diversity of backgrounds and skills represented. Actually other events served to extend suspicion and erode trust between individuals. For example, pay among faculty was inconsistent, based on nationality and not on education level or experience. And, the American faculty members, mostly expats living in the Middle East, and the Americans in administration, specifically recruited to the College, were given different perks in housing and salary. All of these factors added to the dynamics of power relations within the college.

The findings from this assessment process confirmed that faculty and administration held significantly different expectations of themselves and each other. As the college was still developing policies, procedures, and systems, the faculty was very uncomfortable. A tangible concern and mistrust permeated the work environment. Many instructors became risk averse as they watched others develop programs, basketball tournaments, debate teams, and choral groups and not be supported (at times even punished) by the administration. By the end of the semester, even the faculty members who decided to stay were very careful about the level of risk taking and commitment to the College.

Faculty expectations when they began

Faculty turnover is quite high at the college, with only about one-third of the instructors staying longer than a year. Most faculty members were recruited by other staff members or through an advertisement. Many were hopeful when they arrived and saw the opportunities to

make a difference in the lives of the students as an incentive for contributing to this college. "I came to the college to empower women and work with the challenge that this school presented." Another faculty member felt "inspired that through this college she can make a contribution to the society in which we live. There is a lot to do in terms of empowering women and the possibilities are amazing." Faculty saw themselves first and foremost as teachers. Then they see in other roles as coordinators of departments or programs, as people who support the students through other means besides only teaching, and as people who wear many hats depending on the needs of the college. For example, the coordinator of the physical education program feels that her role at Effat College is "to get the girls fit and give them the direction toward a more healthy life in the future." She wants them to take home this knowledge and understanding to teach their family members and other women that exercise is good for them. She connects with the girls, at times, on a one on one basis acting as coach, teacher, and sometimes tutor and counselor for them.

Some of the faculty mentioned that they appreciate the flexibility in their role at Effat College and are able to bring together many pieces of work they have done in the past in order to make something new happen here. This is easily observed in the Independent Learning Center (ILC), the Center for Communication and Rhetoric (CCR), student affairs, and the physical education programs. "This role brings together many things from her past. She enjoys building the CCR to help the girls gain leadership skills, build confidence, and identify their own abilities. It also lets them believe in themselves to voice opinions and have differing opinions in order to have an intellectual exchange."

Faculty experiences and surprises

The faculty had mixed reactions when they talked about what surprised them about Effat College and their students. Some of the faculty who have been in Jeddah for many years or who had a hand in developing the college were not surprised by much when they began working here. Others responded that they were surprised many aspects of the College and life in Saudi Arabia. For example, most faculty were shocked by students' attitudes toward learning. "Some of the girls here see education as a luxury, not as a fundamental part of their life."

Many of the faculty from other schools or universities commented on the level of "incredible facilities and computer infrastructure here" and "small number of students in classes". There were 3 computer labs on campus with current hardware and programs, and most classes had fewer than 15 students. One concern of having a small number of students is the amount of power that the students feel. "They don't go directly to the teacher if they have a problem; instead they go behind you and complain to the administration." Some faculty members mentioned that they were "free to develop new programs," but others see the lack of an established structure as being "disorganized." Although a library and other learning/ resource centers were established, they were not integrated into the curriculum or supported by other faculty. Some were concerned about the lack of collaboration or teamwork between instructors.

Faculty did not feel secure in their work due to a lack of communication about administrative decisions, and a perceived devaluing of teaching. Classes were often canceled for whole college activities designed by the administration, and examination procedures were overlooked or undermined. While much confusion centered on whether the College would be run like a university with autonomy and value of instructors as professionals, or like a school where ministry rules and paperwork guide the work in teaching and learning. The College was not yet accredited by the Saudi Ministry; therefore, much of the workload focus was to complete the

procedures for attaining accreditation and not so much on the teaching and learning. As the year came to an end, contracts and salaries reflected changes imposed by the accreditation process.

Assumptions about faculty role

Both administrators and faculty were asked to rank duties of faculty, administration, and students. Expectations of the faculty are consistent between the administration and faculty groups. The numbers in the parentheses indicate the rank of the response. Both groups agreed that (a) "understanding and contributing to the teaching mission/vision of the college" was the first priority for the faculty. However, the faculty members asked "what exactly was the mission and vision of the college?" The second priority was to (b) "strive for excellence in teaching." Yet, the definition of excellence in teaching varied between the groups. The faculty was more interested in the specifics of instruction ([1] conduct well-prepared, purposeful, and organized class sessions and [2] understand and use principles of learning & teaching), whereas the administrators were more interested in teacher's knowledge, style, and skills ([1] have enthusiasm for teaching and topic and [2] understand and use principles of learning & teaching).

Assumptions about administration role

When asked to respond to what the expectations of the administration entail, the priorities for administration and faculty varied significantly. The top 10 expectations shared by the administration focus mainly on their role of managing and leading the college ([1] meet the requirements of the ministry and [2] clarify the purpose and vision of the college). Their 10th expectation relates to the learning environment ([10] create a supportive environment for a learning community and sharing of ideas). They did feel that respect for others should be included as an assumption for everyone.

The faculty's answers conflict with the administration's view. The answers reflect their concern with the instability of the College. The priorities should be to (1) establish policies and procedures," including hiring, registration, firing, and writing contracts; (2) security of employment; (3) establish two-way communication channels. Their last selection was for governance of the college- the administrative focus.

Conclusions and Implications for Adult Education

A gap emerges between expectations of faculty and administration and the faculty's lived experiences. As an adult educator interested in educational leadership, many issues need to be addressed at this College. While Haworth and Conrad present a standard for excellence, this College is far from reaching it. The unclear vision of the college permeates all the instructors concerns about how they should prepare the students, what tools they are using, and what level of autonomy they have over their work. With a lack of vision and mixed signals about support, the faculty was unclear and insecure about what they should be doing. The administration focused on the requirements from the ministry before attending to the needs of the instructors. Although the pyramid of skills for students was important to the teaching and learning happening at the College, it took a back seat to setting up systems and getting the College established as a prominent institution in Jeddah. This College should heed Freire's warning about bringing education to these students. The ideal graduate, a leader in the community, may truly want to lead in the future and in a monarchy like Saudi Arabia, that could be dangerous.

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