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Why Clusters: A Streamlined and Empowered Administrative Structure

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Why Clusters: A Streamlined and Empowered Administrative Structure

August 17th, 2016 by Don Birx

One of the things our change consultant said that he learned from us was the importance of structure in supporting the changes that an organization is contemplating. In fact, he has now included it in his recommendations and advice to other universities. He also noted that many organizations do not achieve their goals because they are unwilling or unable to make the structural changes required. Our administrative structure grew over time in a somewhat haphazard fashion in response to our periods of growth and decline. The unintended consequences of this included a system of multiplicative and duplicative structures that made decision making and resultant action more complicated than needed. Our structure was organic, but it grew without a holistic strategy for how all the pieces would work and fit together. This was not anyone's fault; we just outgrew what we were and yet couldn't visualize what we should be.

Clusters will put us back together again and facilitate transdisciplinarity while streamlining our processes and empowering those who are closest to the point where decisions need to be made. They are also highly efficient. I first saw how this worked at Penn State as I wondered how the **Behrend College** could thrive when so much of the tuition went back to University Park. At the heart of its success was a system of schools that functioned liked our clusters will administratively. True, the academic organization was still more siloed, like traditional colleges, however, in administration everything was clustered together with empowered leadership and there were no departments or department chairs (though there were program chairs). Administration at the executive level was very lean and could be because the financial and academic data was distributed to the schools where the decisions could be made without constant approvals at the college or university level. The schools had a full time director, but functioned as a team with the program chairs and a complement of administrative support staff. In essence, while Behrend is about the same size as Plymouth, instead of 24 departments and three colleges, there were four schools with directors and program chairs (that focused on the academic components of traditional department chairs). This allowed faculty to allocate more of their time to the teaching, to enhancing the student experience, to research and service missions and less to administration. Moreover, bringing related programs into schools such as Humanities and Social Sciences encouraged interdisciplinary gatherings that would not have occurred otherwise.

How we implement clusters here is up to us, but one of the potential benefits of this type of organization is a streamlined, efficient, effective, and empowered administration.

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