

Voices from the Field: Learning about Community College Transformation and Change from the Words of Practitioners

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This article examines the characteristics present in community colleges that have gained a reputation for exemplary performance. Using narratives from winning and honorable mention entries of a national competition, the authors examine common themes in relation to the literature on organizational change and case studies of award-winning organizations outside of higher education. The findings indicate that the award winning institutions have adopted a continuous improvement process that uses data to identify the needs of their respective communities and to develop initiatives to address these needs. Common themes in the narratives point to planned change as a common characteristic.

Community colleges have earned both a national and global reputation for being innovative and responsive to the needs and demands of their students and geographical service areas. Perhaps more than any other sector of American higher education, community colleges have mastered the art of staying “in touch” with their internal and external customers.

Although 2-year institutions continue to face numerous and varied challenges in meeting constituent needs (Amey, 2010), there are arguments that today’s environment stresses the importance of rapid response to meeting needs (Wallin, 2009). And there a number of award programs that recognize community colleges for their development and implementation of highly successful programs.

The purpose of our study is to examine community college success stories in an attempt to identify common characteristics involving exemplary programs and services. Although a number of research efforts have examined effective programs, these studies have typically concentrated on the personal and professional qualities of the senior organizational leader and how this individual has facilitated exemplary organizational performance. This study invokes a somewhat different strategy. We assume that the recognized programs have addressed a need, and begin by examining whether the need is internal or external to the community college. We then examine the narratives of the projects to determine whether there are common themes that bridge across the

respective categories in the competition and compare our findings to the extant literature. In conducting this study, we hope to gain a greater understanding of change and transformation within community colleges and suggest how the basic principles associated with these terms can enhance performance, if embraced by an institution. This increased level of performance can, in turn, lead to further exemplary programs and services to support the needs of both internal and external constituents.

To answer this purpose, we performed a content analysis of “winning” and “honorable mention” narratives from a national competition between 2002-2003 and 2008-2009. Two-year colleges across the nation voluntarily submitted these narratives to showcase a specific initiative in their instructional programs. A panel of community college instructional administrators evaluated the narratives using criteria created by fellow practitioners, and selected the winning and honorable mention entries.

Literature Review

The term *change*, one that surfaces frequently in textbooks and studies concerned with organizational behavior and is often paired with the word *leadership*, has appeared increasingly in research focused on improving the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education institutions (Craig, 2004; Hawkins, 2009; Wallin, 2010). Based on the current research, we begin this literature review by providing an overview of the concepts associated

with change and how it is effected and then examine why change has become--and will continue to be--so important to the survivability and vitality of today's community colleges. To draw parallels with the purpose of the study, the final section of this literature review chronicles common executive leadership characteristics that have surfaced in award-winning organizations outside of higher education.

Change: an Overview

The majority of literature concerning change and transformation within an organization focuses initially on the senior leader, and with good reason. The senior leader is expected to set the tone for establishing change and facilitating the transformation of the organization. Thus, it is no surprise that the words change (or transformational) and leadership are routinely linked together in the literature. In fact, change leadership has often been used interchangeably with the concept known as transformational leadership. According to Birnbaum (1988), transformational leadership focuses primarily on an end product versus the means for achieving it. This approach "taps the motivations of followers to lead them to new and better values in the support of the intended change" (p. 24). Roueche, Baker, and Rose (1989) offered a more definitive assessment by stating that change-agent status is a foundational principle of transformational leadership in community colleges. The transformational leader has a vision, serves as a role model, and prepares organizational members for work in changing environments. This latter quality, the ability to ready subordinates for and then lead them in a new direction, reaffirms the importance for a transformational leader to earn the trust of the organizational workforce (Hawkins, 2009).

To underscore the importance that trust plays in facilitating organizational change, Neves and Caetano (2009) argued that interrelated factors are often at work. When an organization faces major changes, trusting relationships between the leader and the employees must develop. While the specific outcomes can obviously affect such relationships, the advocacy and intentions of a leader in promoting change can also have a major impact on the organization. The shared meanings of key events and the frequency of social exchanges therefore play a vital role in building trust to effect change (Neves & Caetano, 2009).

Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, and Hiller (2009) also stressed the importance of regular interaction between a leader and organizational members. These authors pointed to three influences associated with transformational leadership. Besides regular interaction (referred to as proximal influence), a transformational leader can have a distal influence on an organization. This creates a culture that fosters success and facilitates the internalization of "the organization's goals and values" (p. 1368). Lastly, these authors described external influence as the leader's status

as the organizational figurehead who interacts routinely with key external constituents. In this latter role, the leader has the opportunity to engage various stakeholders and access "vital resources . . . build good relations with customers, suppliers, and community" (p. 1368), actions that may prove helpful to the organization at some future time.

The literature, while often focused solely on the president, also indicates that higher education--as an entity--and the people within an institution must be receptive to change. Referring to them as traditional change agents for society, Craig (2004) explained that colleges and universities must change themselves to meet various challenges. The entire organization has to play a role; gone are the days when change involved only certain individuals, programs, or departments. Institutions wanting to engage in change must satisfy multiple concerns: (1) why it is being sought, (2) what change is desired or needed, (3) how to accomplish it, and (4) the desired outcomes being targeted. Key organizational qualities such as shared values, beliefs, and a vision among all stakeholders; trust, support, and empowerment; prudent risk-taking ventures, without fear of reprisal; perseverance and patience; open communication channels; and a vibrant reward and recognition system are crucial to the change process (Craig, 2004).

In their study, "Riding the Waves of Change: Insights from Transforming Institutions," Eckel, Green, and Hill (2001) argued that transformational change is a highly desirable quality. Transformational change requires time and is intentional, and it alters the culture of the organization by serving as "a collective, institution-wide movement. . . . When enough people act differently or think in a new way, that . . . becomes the norm" (p. 6). To demonstrate the various forms transformational change can take, these authors developed two broad categories of indicators--explicit and implicit. Explicit indicators include policy changes, the organizational structure, and practices (e.g., budget priorities, curriculum alterations, and the manner in which decisions are made). Implicit indicators reflect a shift in organizational culture and attitudes (e.g., cross-functional teams; the increased use of, reliance on, and involvement with internal and external stakeholders; and a willingness to try new approaches) (Eckel et al., 2001).

To understand why some institutions do better than others in welcoming and embracing deep, pervasive, transformational change, these same authors pointed to leadership and environmental conditions. Leaders committed to change facilitate it by creating an organizational setting based on trust, shared values, and a willingness to listen to stakeholders. These leaders viewed change as a long-term process requiring new ways of thinking. Eckel et al. (2001) also referred to "propitious external environments and internal conditions" (p. 13) as contributory to transformational change. Despite competing priorities and

outside forces, these organizations maintain control over their efforts to instill deep and pervasive change across the institution. Not surprisingly, the size of an institution can enhance or thwart the change process, due in large part to the manner in which information travels throughout the organization. Information often travels slower and unevenly across large institutions, and it can become diffused due to built-in characteristics such as multiple layers of supervision and administration and the specialization and interests of the faculty. All of these factors can lead to a fragmented sense of community, thus further complicating the ability to effect change (Eckel et al., 2001).

Conversely, the smallness of an institution can facilitate the speed in which change information flows--something that can make speculation and rumor "the more seductive cousins" (p. 23) of the change process. Leaders must be prudent in providing information about change actions, or otherwise incur both anxiety and anger from within--and perhaps external to--the organization. Unlike the fragmentation that can occur in large organizations, members of a small institution frequently enjoy a greater sense of community. There is a closer-knit camaraderie and greater involvement in the day-to-day operations of the institution, factors that lead to a greater expectation for playing "integral roles in key institutional processes" (p. 24).

Change: Its Impact on Community Colleges

Leadership and management textbooks are replete with examples chronicling the impact a change agent can have on an organization. Although Kezar (2009) indicated that businesses are often more receptive to change than are higher education institutions, community colleges have frequently served as the focus of studies centered on change and those agents able to effect it. McKinney and Morris (2010) referred to change as a key characteristic often dictating the level of success realized by 2-year institutions. In their study of organizational change in community colleges, these authors emphasized the essential role that leadership plays in the process. Specifically, they pointed to the need for a shared vision--something that should originate with the president. They also referred to the president as the "champion of the cause" (p. 198) when organizational change was involved, since this person must keep the institution focused on moving toward the objective. To achieve this objective, they offered other major considerations such as effective communication to garner support from the workforce and key constituents, in-depth planning, and the creation of teams to handle various aspects of the change process. Resistance, both from within and outside the institution, along with potential budgetary and personnel costs, can serve as the biggest challenges for a leader championing change.

Van Wagoner (2004) explained that the ability to

implement change is crucial for community colleges because of their missions, which involve the delivery of numerous quality programs and services to diverse audiences. Pointing to the "intimate link" (p. 716) these colleges share with their local communities, he stated that 2-year institutions are more affected by changing conditions than other sectors of higher education. To navigate these conditions, he argued that change is--in the end--linked to the emotions, perceptions, and behaviors of those individuals who comprise the organization. Simply stated, "perceptions of change can . . . create communication issues, inspire resistance . . . and produce barriers" (p. 716). He found that, when community colleges and their leaders increased the level of awareness and involvement among individuals affected by it, change became more palatable and supportable. He advocated open lines of communication to provide insight about the nature of the projected change and to educate participants as to the timing, purpose, and magnitude of their efforts.

Echoing many of the same concerns about the diverse missions of 2-year colleges, and the need for these institutions to be responsive, Eddy (2004) examined how presidents present change initiatives to achieve certain goals. Referring to these individuals as "drivers for institutional change" (p. 63), she noted that, when choosing certain change goals, community college presidents also formulated the strategies required to implement them. The meaning these leaders attached to specific change affected how it was framed for their campuses. Several key components aided this endeavor; one of these involved communication. Change agents had an in-depth understanding of the institutional culture, information that enabled them to initially make meaning of the change in their own minds. Based upon their understanding of various constituents, these leaders were then able to espouse the change in a way that proved meaningful to different groups.

Eddy's effort (2004) to explain presidential cognition as a key component of change in community colleges focused on a pair of distinct but interrelated leadership capabilities: (1) the ability to grasp the obvious and not-so-obvious aspects of the local culture, and (2) sensemaking, defined as the knack for guiding "individuals through times of change and ambiguous situations" (p. 65). Leaders need to understand the culture of the organization, which allows them to frame the change--and then choose the method(s) for implementing it--in a way that will be acceptable to and supported by institutional members. Sensemaking provides a level of stability and comfort for the organization. As Eddy (2004) explained, organizational members expect their leaders to provide a certain level of interpretation regarding activities involving and affecting the institution. Leaders who can effectively make sense of change play a major role in how organizational members view it.

Calling leadership the most important factor for the success of a community college, Wallin (2009) opined that today's environment mandates the ability for 2-year institutions to change rapidly. She challenged community college leaders to become more responsive in not only supporting change, but to become change agents in response to both internal and external organizational forces. She also emphasized that leaders--and their organizations--must undergo a multi-step process to experience change. To initiate it, an organization must first recognize a compelling need for change. Secondly, the change must be effected by employing different "technologies . . . ways of operating, or . . . teams" (p. 33). The organization must safeguard against reverting back to its old ways of doing business, after change has been initiated. A reward system must also be in place to sustain the changes made, and the organizational leader must serve as a champion of the change effort, to safeguard its sustainment.

In a follow-on effort, Wallin (2010) explained that the old style of leading community colleges no longer works because of the ambiguity in today's environment. Forces both internal and external to the organization require leaders to endorse and embrace change--as a matter of practice. Calling change leadership an extension of transformational leadership, she also explained that the former is both broader and deeper than the latter. Change leadership involves four defining leadership characteristics. First, it is anticipatory--the leader must have a vision and look forward. Secondly, change leaders must constantly analyze their internal and external settings, to ensure possession of key information from which to make the best decisions. The third characteristic involves acting in a manner that is timely and decisive, capitalizes on the abilities of various teams involved in change, and is accountable to all constituents. Lastly, change leadership requires that the implemented change be reviewed and reassessed, and the purpose(s) for its implementation be affirmed through the actions and reflections of the leader (Wallin, 2010).

Labeling it as more complex than transformational leadership, and vital to the success of community colleges, Cloud (2010) referred to change leadership as a "moral act, based on ethical actions, that serves the long-term interests of the college and its constituencies" (p. 74). He cautioned that, despite the value it offers for community colleges, change leadership is quite difficult to implement and can even jeopardize one's career. As a guide, he offered a variety of personal qualities and competencies that change leaders possess. First and foremost, he pointed to the art of being a better listener than a talker. A community college change leader should also subscribe to the concept of "first among equals" (cited in Birnbaum, 1988, p. 89), rather than engaging in the classic style of "top-down driven" decision-making. Closely tied to this concept is the idea that change leaders be committed to

serving--before leading--others. As used here, the term "others" refers to a variety of different types of community college stakeholders--students, faculty and staff, and local constituents.

Change leaders must not only have a vision for their institution, but also possess the ability to promote its implementation through persuasion and the garnering of support. These leaders likewise must demonstrate an acute sense of authenticity, a quality that can serve as a catalyst for gaining respect and support from others. Lastly, change leaders must possess what Cloud (2010) referred to as emotional intelligence. This multi-faceted quality incorporates behaviors such as self-confidence, self-discipline, advocacy, empathy, compassion, a willingness to empower others, and respect for the history and traditions of the institution (Goleman, 2004, as cited in Cloud, 2010).

Characteristics in Award-Winning Organizations

So far, this review has showcased a number of basic principles comprising change leadership and personal and professional traits deemed crucial to effecting change in a community college. We were not able to find community college research literature that addressed common characteristics that contributed to the organizational success of initiatives. As a result, we examined several studies focused on the characteristics of exemplary organizations external to higher education. We found a variety of key characteristics that award-granting agencies labeled as contributory to the exemplary efforts of the evaluated organization.

Hannah (1995) chronicled 15 examples of winning organizations vying for the Ford Foundation's Innovations in State and Local Government award. Her case study research focused on "commonalities of success" (p. 217) and the organizational conditions that fostered exemplary performances. She found that leadership served a pivotal role in cultivating an innovative work environment--one that included an organizational vision and a corresponding level of resource support. Other critical components that facilitated success included openness in any changes undertaken, the freedom to try new approaches (without the fear of failure), and coalition/team-building.

The work of Calhoun, Griffith, and Siniotis (2007) likewise examined organizational commonalities in the health-care industry. Through interviews with executives from agencies that have received the Baldrige National Quality Award, these authors found several key ingredients for organizational success. Conceding that the Baldrige award is not the only yardstick for identifying high-performing organizations, this trio nonetheless pointed to the ability of leadership to cultivate a culture of support

and responsiveness to meet the needs of all stakeholders. Transformational leadership had become pervasive in these organizations, as evidenced by the empowerment of workers, the welcoming of change, negotiated goals and collaboration, communication, shared governance, performance accountability at all levels, and an appropriate level of rewards and recognition.

Continuous process improvement also played a vital role for these award winners. Data-driven decisions served as the standard, as these organizations tracked various success factors and then made adjustments to improve productivity. Leaders endorsed and closely monitored collected data and endorsed feedback mechanisms that provided insight and input from key stakeholders to determine what was truly important to the organization and its constituents. Leadership also provided a vibrant training and development program for the workforce, to help employees maximize their productivity and contributions to the organization (Calhoun et al., 2007).

Kendall and Bodinson (2010) also searched for common characteristics existing in health-care organizations that won the Baldrige award. Regardless of the size and complexity of these organizations and their local communities, three similarities surfaced repeatedly: (1) the high level of commitment to people, (2) a spirit of collaboration, and (3) outstanding results. To achieve these, leadership promoted stellar two-way communication with stakeholders, with special emphasis given to listening. Additionally, the chief executives of the organizations were committed to empowerment, employee development, and a strong reward and recognition system that encouraged exemplary results (Kendall & Bodinson, 2010).

Methodology

To examine exemplary organizational performance in community colleges, we conducted a content analysis of programs that have been selected as winning or honorable mention entries in the Exemplary Initiatives Competition sponsored by the National Council of Instructional Administrators (NCIA). NCIA (<http://ncia.unl.edu>) is an affiliate council of the American Association of Community Colleges that supports instructional administrators and the instructional mission of community colleges. Initially used as a quantitative means of structured analysis of communications, content analysis has expanded to qualitative procedures to draw inferences that go beyond the simple counts of the use of words or phrases. Berelson (1952) classified content evidence as examining both “what is said” and “how it is said.” For the purpose of this study, we followed Patton’s (2002) definition of content analysis as, “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meaning” (p. 453).

The Exemplary Initiatives Competition

NCIA began the Exemplary Initiatives Competition in 1989. Each year, a committee of community college practitioners identifies categories for the competition. Community colleges are invited to submit a narrative of no more than 1,000 words to enter the competition. The committee then evaluates the entries and selects winning and honorable mention entries. Starting with the 2002-2003 competition, and continuing through the 2008-2009 competition, institutions that submitted a winning and/or honorable mention entry were asked to expand the original 1,000-word narrative to more fully describe the work processes and resources involved, problems associated with and attributes realized from implementing the initiative, the applicability of the initiative to other institutions, and the current status of the initiative.

The NCIA committee has not always selected two institutions for recognition as winning and honorable mention entries. In particular years:

- co-winning entries have been selected, with no honorable mention awarded
- a winning entry has been selected, but no honorable mention was awarded
- a winning entry has been selected, and two honorable mentions were awarded
- no winning entry was selected in the category, but an honorable mention was awarded
- no winning entry was selected in the category, and two honorable mentions were awarded.

During the seven-year period of expanded narratives, a total of 76 programs from 62 community colleges were selected for recognition. We examined the expanded narratives for 65 programs that were selected as winning and honorable mention entries and submitted expanded narratives, representing 58 community colleges. During this time frame the following 13 program categories were included in the competition: Assessment and Evaluation; Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes; Curriculum Innovation; Diversity and Inclusiveness; Educational Technology; General Education; Organizational Change; Responding to Community Needs; Student Learning and Academic Support; Student Retention and Success; Teaching and Learning; Technology Enhanced Learning; and Workforce Development. Some categories were included in only 1 year of the time period we examined, while other categories were included in multiple years. The number of categories included in the Exemplary Initiatives Competition ranged from four to six.

Besides offering an overview and the end results, each expanded narrative chronicled the internal and external issues in bringing the initiative to fruition. These issues are crucial to our study. Rather than looking for differences in the content between the various “winning” and

“honorable mention” initiatives, our investigation focuses on whether certain characteristics--described in the available literature concerning change and transformation--will be reflected in program narratives judged as exemplary.

Data Collection

Berg (2004) has emphasized the importance of criteria of selection in conducting a content analysis study. The criteria of selection must be formally established before the actual data analysis begins. In this study, manifest content (actual text) and latent content (implied text meaning) pertaining to the template used in developing the expanded narratives and the criteria for evaluating the entries were categorized (Holsti, 1969). We incorporated Berelson's (1952) steps in category framing:

1. Write down all possible related categories conceivable before reading the documents.
2. Study the documents to be analyzed.
3. When defining the categories, read the content for each major category.
4. If in doubt, keep the categories detailed rather than general.

NCIA developed a template to guide the winning and honorable mention narratives, based on organizational effectiveness literature (Cameron, 1981, 1986; Lysons & Hatherly, 1992; Lysons, Hatherly, & Mitchell, 1998). The template includes the following five descriptors: (1) program leadership, (2) human resources, (3) financial resources, (4) aspects of planning and implementation, and (5) assessment/evaluation of the program. Based on the described criteria for the competition and the template, we initially created a basic list of possible categories. As detailed in the following section, we used the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) to revise the categories during the first phase of data analysis. The final list of categories included:

1. Identifying the constituency for whom the program was developed or the constituency that influenced the program (students, faculty/staff, governmental or accrediting agency, community, business and industry);
2. Identifying the specific aspects of leadership that contributed to the success of the initiative (leadership support, faculty buy-in, communication, funding);
3. Identifying the specific purpose of the initiative (fulfill an unmet need, access, cost effectiveness, mandate for governmental or accrediting agency);
4. Key organizational aspects that contributed to the success of the initiative (use of technology, professional development or training, use of consultants or experts, partnerships with educational or other entities); and

5. Decision processes (data-driven, participatory, advisory groups, use of pilot studies).

Data Analysis

We independently coded the data in three phases. In the first phase, we each highlighted key terms/phrases/indicators that supported the initial categories we developed and also refined the listing of categories based on non-listed items that were prevalent in the wording of the narratives. Independent assistants then created Excel spreadsheets of our lists. We completed a check of 25% of the entries on the spreadsheets and, with the exception of spelling errors, found no missing or incorrect entries. In the second phase, we independently looked for commonalities within the respective entry categories. For entry categories that were repeated in multiple years, we combined the data. As a final step in the data analysis, we examined the data across the respective entry categories. This final reduction identified common key terms/phrases/indicators that contributed to organizational performance and recognition by a committee of peers.

Because analysis of the data was conducted independently, we communicated twice at the end of each respective stage of data analysis by telephone and email. The initial meeting allowed for the sharing of information and discussion of how we had completed that stage of the analysis. The second meeting consisted of discussions about the patterns and findings that appeared to be arising during the coding and analysis of the data. These six meetings served as a mechanism to resolve any differences in the analysis and ensured that the respective independent analyses were conducted in the same fashion.

Validity

We addressed validity concerns in three ways. First, NCIA sent us all winning and honorable mention entry page proofs of the narratives, which ensured that the content we analyzed accurately represented the experiences stemming from each program. Second, we recorded our observations at each respective stage of data analysis and then met to reflect on the observations, categorization of the data, and findings. Finally, an independent observer conducted a similar analysis of 17 (26%) randomly selected entries and compared their findings to the findings of the authors.

Findings and Discussion

Our initial consideration was to identify whether the community colleges had responded to internal or external needs. The Exemplary Initiative entries universally support the primary mission of a community college--to serve the needs of the community. Almost two-thirds of

the narratives indicated that the initiative addressed an external need. Among the external constituencies, potential students were referenced as the targeted community stakeholders for the overwhelming majority of initiatives. Potential students include P-12 students who might benefit from programs or services provided by the community college as well as specific categories of potential students (e.g., low-income, underprepared for college, unemployed or underemployed) or new initiatives that would attract additional students in a specific vocation or career (e.g., health care workers, P-12 teachers). Outside agencies or organizations (e.g., arts commissions, social service agencies) were the second most referenced external stakeholders.

Internal needs focused primarily on improving existing policies, programs, services or processes. Internal needs most often were directed towards the current student population. Improving the ability or skills of faculty, both adjunct and full-time, was the second most commonly referenced internal need. Staff improvements were the other identified internal need, and focused on customer service or the cross training of functions to improve institutional processes or services.

A common theme that emerged in the identification of needs was data-driven decision making. An important characteristic of the winning and honorable mention institutions is that they have developed the means to gather and analyze data and to use the data in efforts to address constituency needs. In terms of identifying the needs of external constituencies, the use of community focus groups and advisory boards were common among the recognized programs. This finding supports the literature that emphasizes the close linkage of the community college and the communities they serve (Van Wagoner, 2004), the importance of leaders who interact on a regular basis with external constituencies (Resick et al., 2009), and the importance of listening as a crucial communication skill (Cloud, 2010). In terms of identifying internal needs, institutional investigations pointed to areas where improvement was needed. Data gathered in institutional studies were often compared to peer groups, state or national data to determine the standing of the community college, and the importance of initiating improvement efforts.

The content analysis also revealed common themes that appeared across the respective program categories of the competition. We organize these characteristics according to the template descriptors for the expanded narratives: (1) program leadership, (2) human resources, (3) financial resources, (4) aspects of planning and implementation, and (5) assessment/evaluation of the program.

Program Leadership

Three common themes emerged in the narratives regarding program leadership. First, leaders at the institution directed both fiscal and human resources towards

the initiative or institutional efforts to secure the necessary resources for the initiative. Second, the senior leadership prepared the organization for the change, often making internal changes to the organizational structure to create teams to develop and implement the initiative and for collaboration across the common organizational structures. Finally, once the community colleges had decided to launch an initiative, senior leadership assumed a facilitative role, with processes controlled by faculty and mid-level administrators and staff members.

This description of program leadership supports the literature of organizational change, change agents in community colleges, and leadership characteristics of award-winning organizations. An initial component of program leadership in the Exemplary Initiatives narratives identifies the attributes of communication, listening, and the development of trust in effecting change (Hawkins, 2009; Neves & Caetano, 2009; Van Wagoner, 2004). The narratives indicated the importance of senior leaders preparing the organization to change by creating teams and opening avenues of interdisciplinary and collaborative efforts (Roueche, Baker, & Rose, 1989; McKinney & Morris, 2010). Finally, senior leadership created program leadership by facilitating and empowering individuals and teams to accomplish the purpose of the initiative (Craig, 2004; Wallin, 2010).

Riggs (2009) points out that research on community college leadership has focused primarily on the presidency. The narratives we examined also indicate the importance of mid-level leadership in the successful development and implementation of the recognized programs. Studies in the management literature have pointed to the importance of middle-management in facilitating change (Balogun, 2003; Huy, 2002). We do not mean to discount the importance of senior leadership, but this finding supports Riggs' (2009) contention that mid-level community college leaders have the greatest impact on the actual operations of an initiative.

Human Resources

Two themes regarding human resources emerged from our examination of the narratives. Institutional "buy-in" was identified as the most important organizational factor leading to the success of initiatives. Numerous narratives stressed the importance of buy-in from both full- and part-time faculty as well as staff members. Frequently mentioned in the narratives is the importance of buy-in from adjunct faculty. Akroyd and Caison (2005) pointed out that part-time community college faculty are less satisfied with their jobs than are their full-time counterparts. Institutions recognized in the Exemplary Initiatives Competition have developed cultures that value the contributions of adjunct faculty, especially the linkages these individuals provide to external constitu-

encies of the institution. A second theme emerged in the narratives that described initiatives to improve or enhance existing programs or services. In most instances, these efforts were designed to improve student learning and outcomes. Faculty members realized the need to change, were proactive in bringing issues to the senior leadership of the community college, and were willing to take the risk to try different strategies.

The narratives support the literature on developing a culture of shared vision and responsibility, leading to the institutionalization of a new initiative (Eckel et al., 2001; Resick et al., 2009). Further, the importance of faculty and staff as contributors to organizational change and effectiveness emphasizes the change from the traditional top-down management style (Cloud, 2010) and supports previous findings of the importance of faculty in the performance of community colleges (Levin, Cox, Cerven, & Haberler, 2010).

Financial Resources

The lack of sufficient fiscal resources is commonly identified as a primary barrier in developing innovative programming in community colleges (Katsinas, Tollefson, & Reamey, 2008). A number of Exemplary Initiative narratives describe low- or no-cost efforts, because additional funding was not readily available to develop or implement new programs. Other institutions funded new initiatives through the reallocation of operating funds, human resources, or facilities. Fewer community colleges sought external funding from partners or grants in order to initiate change, pointing to the challenge of continued funding once the soft money was expended. The importance placed on financial resources support the literature, which stresses that institutions need to address how they will accomplish the change (Craig, 2004). Moreover, the reallocation of resources serves as an explicit indicator of a change in organizational direction (Eckel et al., 2001).

A second theme that emerged in this template descriptor was that, because of limited resources, enhanced communication at all levels of the organization was essential. Frequent updates on the status of each initiative parallel the literature's emphasis on the importance of keeping the institution focused on moving toward an objective, increasing the awareness and involvement of individuals impacted by the change, and addressing concerns from both internal and external constituencies (McKinney & Morris, 2010; Van Wagoner, 2004). Craig (2004) stresses that change involves the entire organization, not just certain individuals, programs or departments.

Aspects of Planning and Implementation

The most common theme in this template descriptor references the importance of planning in order to maximize scarce resources. The most common strategy

was the piloting of projects, to measure impact and refine the initiative prior to the wide-range implementation of change. The narratives support the literature by indicating that, for the award-winning institutions, change was intentional (Eckel et al., 2001). These institutions engaged in in-depth planning (McKinney & Morris, 2010) and their planning included consideration of the respective strategies to effect change (Craig, 2004; Eddy, 2004).

A second theme stresses the importance of institutional culture. The narratives support the literature that identifies institutional culture, history, and traditions as important considerations in preparing for change (Eddy, 2004; Goleman, 2004, as cited in Cloud, 2010). Other aspects of institutional culture that appear both in the narratives and literature include the creation of innovative work environments (Hannah, 1995) and the empowerment of faculty, mid- and lower-level administrators, and staff members (Kendall & Bodinson, 2010). Examples of empowerment include dedicating resources for any necessary training or professional development and designing systems to recognize and reward employees that encourage exemplary results (Kendall & Bodinson, 2010).

Assessment

The common theme that emerged in this section of the narratives reveals the impact of continuous improvement efforts on community colleges. A number of narratives point to assessment serving as both a culminating and beginning activity as assessment encourages gathering data that reviews the results of change and considers the desired purpose(s) and outcome(s) of change (Calhoun, Griffith, & Sinioris, 2007; Craig, 2004; Wallin, 2010). For the institutions recognized in the Exemplary Initiatives Competition, assessment verifies whether an initiative has become institutionalized. As Wallin (2009) pointed out, it is important to make sure that the organization does not revert back to its old ways. This theme supports the literature that indicates the importance of analyzing internal and external data to know when change is needed and to identify new programs and services or existing policies, procedures, and programs that need improvement (Wallin, 2010).

Conclusions

The narratives serving as the data for this analysis described programs that had been recognized as 'exemplary' by community college peers. We examined the narratives to identify common themes that bridged across the respective purposes of the initiatives and compared our findings to the extant literature on organizational change and the role of leadership in effecting change. Our conclusions are framed in the research purpose that guided this study.

What common organizational characteristics do community colleges attribute to the success of an exemplary program or service? The most common characteristics of the award-winning institutions is the use of data to identify the needs of their respective communities and to develop initiatives to address these needs. It is apparent that the overwhelming majority of these institutions have adopted a continuous improvement process where assessment identifies constituency needs or institutional programs that need improvement.

We were also able to identify common themes in each of the five descriptors used in the expanded narratives from these recognized institutions. As indicated in the introduction, we began this study with a primary assumption that the programs recognized in the Exemplary Initiatives competition had met a need. Based on this assumption we incorporated the literature on change as a lens to view the narratives. Obviously, developing an exemplary program does not necessarily mean that an institution changes. Two common themes, from the program leadership and planning and implementation descriptors, point to planned change as a common characteristic. The institutions describe in-depth planning based on data and assessment efforts. Institutional leaders prepare the organization for change and dedicate the necessary fiscal and human resources to implement an initiative. This preparation includes the creation of a culture willing to change, with clearly communicated and understood goals, teamwork and collaborative efforts, and the desire to improve educational experiences or programs for the constituencies served by the community college. Authority or 'power' does not rest in any one individual, rather leadership is facilitative and recognizes the importance of institutional buy-in and rewards and recognition for all who contribute to success.

Our examination of the narratives point to the use of data to inform a planning process, the development of a culture that recognizes the importance of continuous improvement, and the allocation of sufficient human and financial resources as common characteristics in community college programs that have been recognized as exemplary. Important to the successful development and implementation of these programs is leadership from senior and mid-level administrators. We hypothesize that when both these characteristics and leadership exist, there is the potential for change, organizational effectiveness, and continuous improvement. Community colleges striving for greater institutional effectiveness can use the commonalities we identified from these voices in the field to meet the needs of the diverse constituencies and communities they serve.

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