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Building a Culture of Innovation: Breaking Down Silos

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Abstract

Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) are divided into colleges and within colleges are departments. Most departments work with their faculty members and have little interaction with others outside their specialty area. This paper outlines the process taken in year one of a two-year journey that one large IHE department which consisted of five stand-alone programs: Educational Administration, School Psychology, School Counseling, Higher Education Administration, and Applied Behavior Analysis took to work toward building a culture of innovation, collaboration, mission, visioning, and scholarship which brought all faculty members together. The department had been working in silos, with no common mission or vision. As part of the process, a leadership team developed a plan to engage twenty-two faculty members across multiple disciplines to enhance student achievement. This paper is a description of the process.

In July of 2016, a new Chair was appointed to lead a department of five stand-alone programs that include Educational Administration, School Psychology, School Counseling, Higher Education Administration, and Applied Behavior Analysis. As a former faculty member in the

department, the new chair was well versed in the areas of need. Although previous efforts were made to bring the diverse group of faculty members together, there were roadblocks that were not overcome during the previous chair's tenure. Historically no regular department meetings were held. Faculty met in monthly program meetings. Due to the departure of senior faculty members and the infusion of new enthusiastic faulty, the new chair thought this was an opportune time to begin to develop a new culture of interdisciplinary collaboration. As a new department chair, the question of, "Who are we as a department?" continued to be raised in conversations.

Within the department, each of the programs has an Academic Program Director (APD) who has oversight of program courses, assessments, and adjunct evaluations. Each program has assigned fulltime faculty with content expertise. The APDs work in collaboration with fulltime faculty to support students and adjuncts, as well as ensure the quality of program courses. This process created a healthy culture of faculty collaboration within each of the programs. However, engagement across the disciplines was infrequent. Therefore, a conversation was initiated to consider a structure for taping into the high level of intellectual capital, not only within department programs, but also across departments in an interdisciplinary collaboration (Power & Handley, 2019; Pharo, et.al. 2012). Realizing that there was a high level of untapped intellectual capital, conversations regarding the development of a framework for purposeful interdisciplinary collaboration commenced.

As an initial step, the department chair met with the department leadership team comprised of the APDs. Monthly meetings were scheduled. The APDs were tasked with completing a program SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis to lay the foundation for the "getting to know you" stage. All department faculty considered the question, "Who are we as a department?" The program SWOTs were shared at the first all faculty department retreat (Quick-MBA, 2010).

The next phase was the development of a strategic plan. The department faculty with expertise in the area of strategic planning informed the process (Booth, 2017; Jackson, 2018). Two faculty members, one from higher education administration and one from educational

administration, were tapped to begin planning along with the department chair. The plan led to a department wide retreat focused on creating a department strategic plan (Wolf & Floyd, 2017). A proposal for a two-day retreat, as well as a funding request, were presented to the dean. The retreat was held in May 2018.

Day One of the retreat began with a welcome from the Associate Dean and Dean of the college setting the tone for change. The Chair outlined the purpose of the day. The big goal was to develop our identity and to determine, "Who are we?" We began with a bingo icebreaker so that faculty could learn more about one another. Prior to the retreat, many faculty members knew one another by name only. Although meant to be a humorous activity, it led individuals to meet one another for the first time and to discover more about their colleagues. In order to begin looking at our identity, each APD provided an overview of their program so that everyone would have knowledge about the specific programs. The SWOTs were presented by the APDs outlining their programs. The process set the stage for developing the department identity (Quick-MBA, 2010). A comprehensive overview of Strategic Planning was presented to the group to provide structure and inform the work of the department for the remainder of the retreat (Booth, 2017; Jackson, 2018; Wolf & Floyd (2017).

The faculty was asked to consider both Strategic Thinking and Strategic Planning as they began their work. To think strategically, department faculty members were asked to envision the most critical ideas that could "make or break" the strategic planning process. The facilitator articulated that the goal of the session, and ultimately the retreat, was to develop a Strategic Plan steeped in excellence that could be implemented by the department. Strategic Thinking was defined as looking through a wide lens, being definitive in nature, action-oriented in practice, and purposeful in its intention to change the "status quo" (Booth, 2017).

The Strategic Planning session focused on the need to embrace leadership responsibilities while still maintaining a shared sense of purpose. Extensive discussion ensued on the need to develop a shared Vision that would steer the various academic programs within the department toward community, collaboration, and previously unexplored partnerships. Increased departmental effectiveness within the College of Education

was the stated goal that was agreed upon by the faculty during the formulation of the Departmental Vision Statement (Wolf & Floyd, 2017).

The facilitators then focused the Academic Program Directors on why and for what purpose Strategic Plans are developed within organizations. Next, the time period that the APDs can expect to be effectively served by the plan was explored as well as the key components that are part of successful Strategic Plans. The final piece of the Strategic Planning session focused on structure and content. The department faculty agreed that the Strategic Plan would need to have both a Vision Statement and a Mission Statement. Core Values emerged as critically important for inclusion in the final plan (QuickMBA, 2010). Goals and Objectives for the plan followed in quick order. The faculty was adamant that a time-specific action plan for implementation be included in the Strategic Plan. To the delight of the facilitators and the Department Chair, the faculty was just as adamant that there be ongoing assessment of the progress, using specific benchmarks developed by the department faculty (Jackson, 2018).

Once the structure for the retreat was presented to department faculty, the College goal for innovation and change was reintroduced. The department chair used the concept of Futuristic Thinking as presented in Amy Webb's book *The Signal's are Talking: Why today's fringe is tomorrow's mainstream (2016)*. The field of Higher Education is rapidly changing and the need to think 'outside the box' is critical for institutions' ability to thrive. Webb (2016) used the example of Uber to highlight the importance of looking towards the future to inform the present. A decade ago, Uber and other ride sharing applications did not exist. What signals did the Yellow Cab industry miss or ignore that allowed the ride share companies to change the industry to the point that Yellow Cab is considered dated and obsolete? With this understanding in place, part of the charge to the department in building their identity was to consider what it would look like four or five years in the future (Asmolov, 2018).

The next portion of the retreat was a faculty conversation based on identity and the future of the department. A robust, whole group conversation on faculty values and beliefs facilitated by one of the faculty retreat planners ensued. Charts were created that included all faculty voices. The questions were:

- If you could map the future of the department, comprised of these five distinct programs, where would it lead?
- This led to a robust conversation about what possibilities lay before us. • How could we design the future where we could create a coherent framework for dynamic strategic decisions?
- How could we immerse leadership in first-person experiences of the future while communicating a long-range vision and instilling a sense of urgent optimism to make the vision a reality?
- What were the commonalities?
- What were the challenges?
- Where did we want to be as a department in five years?

Responses were recorded on chart paper. The whole group divided into several small groups with an assigned APD to facilitate the table discussions. The APDs were assigned the task of taking the questions and the responses which were gathered during the whole group discussion to smaller groups of faculty members for discussion. The groups were purposefully assigned so that a member from each program was sitting at each table group. The discussion topics and comments were recorded on chart paper. A "share-out of ideas" followed. The first day concluded with a dinner at a local restaurant where the conversations continued.

Day Two of the Retreat began with a quick synopsis of the prior day's learning. Faculty were feeling empowered and engaged by the results of Day One of the department retreat. Following the quick review of Day One, the focus was to develop a mission, vision, and set the foundation for goals which would guide the department strategic plan (Booth, 2017; Jackson, 2018).

The work to bring together the various thoughts, values, and beliefs of twenty-two faculty members from diverse disciplines was a challenge. Dialogue started with identifying, from the Day One themes, what the department truly valued. The process required the creation of a functional set of themes. This task was accomplished as a whole group activity that constituted the work of Day Two. No formal group norms were established for this conversation. The faculty facilitator set the tone by informing faculty that respect, hearing and honoring all voices, was critical to the work of building department culture.

The charts from day one, containing the values and beliefs of department faculty, were used to inform themes. An exercise led by a faculty member was used to begin the work of placing values and beliefs into themes. This was a whole group activity that involved all voices.

Eight themes emerged:

1 Inspiring Innovation
2 Nurturing collaboration
3 Celebrating community
4 Interdisciplinary
5 Scholarship/research
6 Embracing equity
7 Maintaining relevance and sustainability
8 Evidence based decision making

The next activity was development of the department mission and vision. The themes, along with the values and beliefs of faculty, were used as a starting point for the development of the mission and vision statements. Faculty were reminded about the importance of respectfully listening and responding to colleagues. Values and beliefs are personal. All voices needed to be honored (Booth, 2017; QuickMBA, 2010).

This portion of the faculty work took the longest. What emerged was a draft mission and vision statement that all faculty were asked to think about in the ensuing days.

Department Vision is an interdisciplinary, innovative community of inquiry.

Department Mission: We, as the EACP Department, will prepare transformative and educational leaders.

The decision was made to have four quarterly department meetings with the first meeting focused on finalizing the department mission and vision statements. The final activity of the retreat was to develop department goals based on the identified themes.

The final department goals were as follows:

- will ensure program decisions are made collectively/
collaboratively
- will review all values and develop action-items for each
- will engage in academic conversation (interdisciplinary)
- will allow time/opportunity to create inter-program scholarly-
like things
- will develop department experts
- will promote adjunct engagement
- will incorporate SEL into all programs within the department
- will provide purposeful support for student interdisciplinary
scholarship, engagement and retention

To close out the final retreat day, the department chair thanked all faculty for the tremendous work and set out the plan for next steps. Each APD was asked to select a department goal. They were charged with moving the goal forward for the department. The decision was made to implement four quarterly meetings. The APDs in pairs were to plan and implement one of the four quarterly meetings to occur during the academic year. APDs were to communicate with department faculty and provide regular updates on progress (Power & Handley 2019).

This concluded the two-day retreat with all faculty; but, the hard work continued with the department leadership team. The department chair met with APDs monthly. The APDs were tasked with leading the goals for the department. To begin this process, the APDs were asked to take their assigned goals and develop a SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound) goal in collaboration with department faculty. These SMART goals were to be shared at the first quarterly department meeting along with voting to finalize the mission and vision statements. Updates on progress of SMART goals were provided at each of quarterly meetings (Nordengren, 2019).
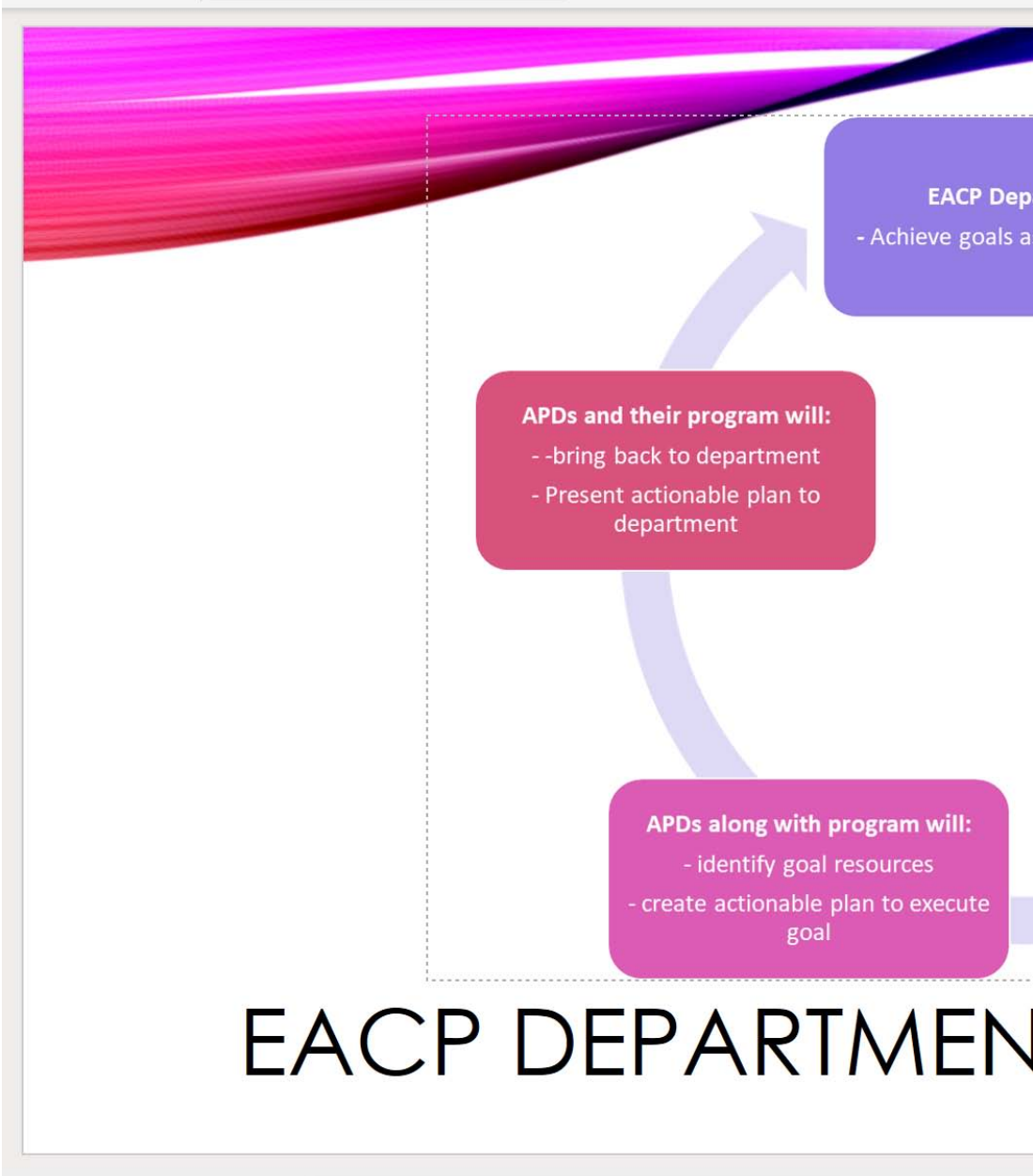
A reflection of the first year of the department wide work showed mixed results. A definite success was the bonding of faculty across the eight disciplines (Power & Handley, 2019). They knew each other by the

end of the two-day retreat and continued to build upon these relationships in the ensuing months. Conversation slowly transitioned from faculty calling their programs the department to "my program in the department." This was a paradigm shift for many who saw their silo program only and forgot that the department was comprised of eight distinct programs. This changed the topics of conversation among the faculty, as more reached out across the varied programs to discuss research, curriculum, and instruction (Pharo, et.al, 2012). The leadership of the APDs to facilitate the SMART goals was successful in moving the work quickly, but also served as a roadblock to fully engaging all department faculty. The APDs were able to develop goals and work towards those goals; but conversations were limited to APDs reporting on progress towards the goals in the quarterly meetings and the monthly APD meetings scheduled by the department chair. Department faculty engagement was not as robust because APDs communicated primarily with their own program faculty. This aspect did not support the goal to build interdisciplinary bridges and to break down the silos within the department (Power & Handley, 2019; Pharo, et.al., 2012).

Although the results were mixed, the first-year efforts of the department laid a strong foundation for the work that will occur in year two of this process. The concept of a department with strong interdisciplinary connections was no longer seen as unattainable and was a goal that faculty members expressed a desire to continue to deepen. It was clear that silos were weakened, but a better process for engaging all faculty beyond the leadership team needs to be developed.

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artment
s a department

APDs will:
- Prioritize goals
- Assign goals

APDs Facilitate Goals
- Program Directors charged with cooperating and pushing goal forward with other APDs as well as program faculty

IT GOAL PROCESS