



# Understanding Organizational Structure in the Institutional Sandcastle

*There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle  
or the mirror that reflects it.*

—Edith Wharton

## **Instructional Faculty, This Is Your Life**

Let's set the scene: The date for "Keep and Cancel" has passed. You keep or end up with 12–15 credit hours, or possibly 20 contact hours, depending on the type of ESL program in which you teach. The division's administrative assistants provide you with a classroom schedule (space) and class rosters. You post your schedule of classes and office hours—five per week—on your office door. Texts are ready—some already on your bookshelves from last semester, and some new ones provided to you by your division. Any instructional supplies—chalk, chalkholders, white board markers, etc.—are provided as the budget allows.

Classes begin. Instructional issues, such as student placement and administrative issues of drop/add, are resolved. A rhythm of classes, lesson preparation and correction, office hours, and assigned committee work is in place.

Other than understanding and appreciating the support you receive from your unit in order to perform your instructional role, how much do you know about the rhythm of the institution in providing support to your unit? Exactly how does the institution as a whole function? If you "play in the sandbox" with other instructional colleagues, who plays in the sandbox with your department chair, dean, or director? Are all sandboxes accessible to all players? If your sandboxes are classrooms and if administrators are building suites, how is the entire sandcastle constructed? Who determines how much sand is allotted to each player and to each sandbox? And are there any bullies kicking sand around?

Understanding the mission of the institution and how resources are allocated to achieve that mission is vital to making your decision to move from the classroom to the boardroom.

## **A Day in the Life of the Institution**

*University communities are complex. They are best approached as pluralistic democracies that behave politically.*

—Walker 1979

### **Organizational Theory, Mission, and Planning**

The organizational theory literature suggests that when people come together around a common goal or set of goals, an organization is created (Weick 1979). The organization thus engages in a variety of activities around this common goal. Some activities contribute toward the goal of the group, some are important only to some of the members but do not disrupt the group as a whole, and some activities may be detrimental to the group. The stability of the organization is maintained as long as there is sufficient cooperation among the members and the amount of disruption does not impede the mission and goals of the organization.

As an organization evolves and becomes more complex, subgroups begin to form and organize around interests particular to each subgroup. The organization becomes a system of

subgroups that collectively contribute to achieving the mission, goals, and objectives of the institution as a whole. Weick (1979) described complex organizations as being made up of “loosely coupled subsystems.” Organizations like colleges and universities are unique examples of this. Some have become so complex they have separate colleges within the institution that make up the university. Although Student Services and the Business, English, and Psychology departments may have their own purposes and goals and they may see the world differently, they all ultimately share the mission of the institution. Loose coupling allows for divergent views to coexist in higher education.

It is important as a faculty member to *know* the mission of the institution in which you operate; however, for an administrator it is critical to *know and understand* it.

No matter how large or small your institution is, your program or unit functions within it as a subsystem, and it is loosely coupled with other subsystems. What happens in your unit affects other units, and what happens in other units affects your unit. As a potential administrator, it will be very important to understand where your unit fits within the community of

the organization as a whole, and how it contributes to the mission. This is because the mission of the organization guides the organization and its leaders. The act of creating the mission statement brings the members of an organization together to a common point of focus (Covey 1990) and lays the foundation for solid leadership. Although the mission statement of your institution is already likely to be in place, creating and periodically reviewing the mission statement involves input from all the stakeholders of the organization; as an administrator you would want to be a part of this process. A mission supported by its members can permeate the organization and be recognizable in the work environment. It is important as a faculty member to *know* the mission of the institution in which you operate; however, for an administrator it is critical to *know and understand* it. Important decisions must be made in support of the institution's mission and goals.

In an organizational environment of abundant resources, where every member of the group has access to sufficient resources in order to function within the organization, decisions about the allocation of resources are generally minimal, or at least not controversial. In an environment of limited or scarce resources, which is more often the case, an organization must develop ways to allocate resources. Whether the organization is small or large, the distribution of resources has a significant effect on the members of the organization.

Distributing limited or scarce resources requires the members to make choices about who and which functions are the

most important and significant within the organization. This dynamic often makes or breaks an administrator. Not only does understanding the process of resource allocation help administrators to get resources, it also helps them to work together in support of each other's sometimes competing interests. As an administrator, it will be important to be able to articulate why your program or unit needs resources over other possibly equally compelling needs.

An important component of resource allocation is planning. In higher education, institutional planning creates a forum for making agreements about the future. One function of planning is that it reduces the level of ambiguity within the organization. Members get a clear sense of where they stand in the organization. Participation in institutional planning, who is included and excluded, affects a member's commitment as well. The planning process that was used, and the outcomes of the planning sessions—that is, the plan—will influence future commitment by the group members.

## Who Knew? I Never Knew

*An administrator's understanding and sensitivity to how a university community behaves will determine whether he or she is effective.*

—Walker 1979

Aha! So that's what's going on in the institutional sandbox. Members of the community have come together around a common goal (higher education), delineated the mission of the institution, and decided how to allocate resources to fulfill the mission.

The instructional faculty member who wishes to move into an administrative faculty position needs to understand the process (institutional planning) of the allocation of sand (resources) to the various sandboxes within the institution. Sand can be a scarce and guarded commodity. Do you want to be a trader in the negotiation process? Are you ready to play—that is, to learn, understand, and support this process? Are you willing to listen and then give input? Are you also ready to be the recipient of less sand for your sandbox and yet be supportive of the institutional sandbox?

Before making the decision to move from the instructional to the administrative sandbox, or if you have already recently made the move to administration, it is imperative to understand the mission, the planning process, and the allocation of resources within the institution. Only then will you know if administration is the right place for you.

## **END-OF-CHAPTER REFLECTION**

In order to assist you in your decision to move into administration or to assist you as a new administrator, please review your knowledge of the mission and planning process of your institution to better understand institutional processes.

The mission (statement) of the institution is:

In accordance with the mission, the goals of the institution are:

The goals of the institution are implemented in the following ways:

The following constituents are included in the planning process:

The institutional organizational chart looks something like this:

My current affiliation is with a [public/private] higher education institution. The operating budget is funded mostly by [government funds/private sources]. As a result, there seems to be [limited/ample] resources within the institution. [I am/am not] aware of how resources are distributed. *For each bracketed set of options, select the one that represents your present situation.*

Where does your program or unit fit in the institution?  
What is its status?

Describe the role of your supervisor (administrator) in the program in which you teach (taught) and her/his role in the institution.

Describe the role of the administrative position you plan to apply for (or have applied for).

These questions will assist you in making your decision to move into administration, and they will also prepare you for applying and interviewing for the desired administrative position. If you are already in a position as a new administrator, these questions will help you better understand the administrative processes of your sandcastle and your role in them as a new administrator.

Do you now have a better picture of the institutional sandcastle? Having been introduced to the builders, the rules of construction, and the resources available, do you still want to apply for a position on the construction crew? Or if you are already hired, are you ready to proceed?

Chapter 2 will help you determine what a position on the sandcastle construction crew may look like.

During the (fortunately for me) very short time that I was a part-time instructor in the field, I was relatively unaware of the ugly world of politics within any academic field . . . there is nowhere that the intricacy of understanding administrative hierarchies, collegial interactions, territoriality of all types, and specific personality types does not come into play.

