ED 761: Higher Education Institutions as Complex Organizations (Fall 2011)

Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education
University of Michigan School of Education

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Class: Friday 1-4pm, 2328 SEB

Course Description:

How do administrators manage modern postsecondary organizations? And how should they? How does organizational purpose get defined? How do context and environment influence the way we think about the structure and function of an organization? Why is organizational change so difficult? Why are management and change strategies effective in one organizational setting and futile in another? How do power and inequality influence an organization? These questions, and a multitude of similar thoughts, are central to the content of this class.

It is useful for those involved in postsecondary institutions to understand what organizations are, how they function (and dysfunction), and why. Therefore, this course intends to provide you with insights into the functioning of educational organizations by exposing you to a wide range of viewpoints in the literature that portray colleges and universities as complex organizations. This is not a class on how to do your administrative or faculty job; this is a class on how to understand the context in which you work.

To do this, we will delve into a variety of scholarly literatures, examining a variety of theories and concepts as tools for understanding academic environments. We will argue and discuss the merits of these ideas and theories for describing and explaining the reality of colleges and universities as we understand and experience that reality. In the process, we will engage in a dynamic learning process that involves most basically our own understandings of postsecondary environments. That is to say, all of us already use theories to guide our actions and shape our understandings; some are quite explicit but others are implicit. These personal "mental models" must become part of the conscious discussion in the class. No matter what your purpose is in taking the course, one outcome will be a deeper understanding of your own (possibly changing) viewpoint and a better appreciation of others' views.

Objectives:

1. To provide students with a systematic and critical understanding of organizational theory and research, and the factors involved in the functioning and analysis of postsecondary institutions, particularly colleges and universities, as complex organizations.
2. To show how these ideas serve as tools for the analysis of organizational situations. The topics covered in the course are chosen to allow students to make connections to various academic contexts, both to encourage students’ reflective understanding and critical analysis, and to provide an improved basis for action.

Course Requirements:

Class Participation. As in any graduate course, including a core class, everyone needs to be co-owners of the class and collectively responsible for its quality and outcomes. I take responsibility for the overall design and direction of the course and for the academic requirements, but it will be facilitated as a seminar or inquiry in which we hold ourselves and each other accountable for a strong and rich intellectual enterprise and dialogue.

Your attendance is essential to a successful collective experience. The format of the class requires that each person come prepared to take an active role in class. This means not only having read the assigned materials, but also being prepared to discuss the salient issues, questions, and problems emerging from the readings, to utilize your knowledge and professional experiences in addressing the readings and any class activities, case problems, etc. Class participation also involves opening oneself to challenge and to be challenged by the ideas and topics of the session. Participation is worth 20% of your final grade.

Group Case Development. The intent of this assignment is to give you a chance to prepare your own case drawn from some organizational aspect or issue in postsecondary education. In small teams, you will write about the case in similar fashion to those examples used in class. The final report calls upon you to provide a complete case description that will be shared with the class. Work on case development and analysis will proceed in the following manner:

1. A preliminary identification of the group and a very brief description of the topic will be due September 30.

2. An outline of the major aspects of the case is due October 28. Students should not change their case topic after this time.

3. For the final case design, you are asked to craft a strong central "story line" describing the key aspects of the case problem. Sufficient detail is necessary for others to make sense of the case problem, but, as authors, the team needs to balance the level of discrete detail with the conceptual threads necessary for the case to be comprehended by the reader. It is important that the case be complex enough to suggest multiple analytic perspectives without becoming too context-specific as to be only understood by those who wrote the case e.g., watch "insider" language and jargon. More conversation about the drafting of cases will take place throughout the term. Relevant accompanying documentation [attachments, memos, system drawings, etc.] should be turned in with the final case, if you choose to use them, as appendices. Complete cases must be distributed by email on the Friday before the scheduled class presentation. Group cases will be due one week before the class presentation, with the first papers due November 28 (30% of grade)
Criteria for evaluating the final case assignment have two parts. The first is the writing of the actual case. Cases will be evaluated for the clarity and professionalism with which the report is presented, the comprehensive care with which the case situation is described and analyzed, and the complexity and relevance of the case. Final cases should be about 20 pages, not including appendices or references.

Group Presentation. Each team will lead a discussion about the case description they have written and the major analytical issues that the case addresses. The presentation should, either through express discussion or the use of group activities, use the various theories learned throughout the course. Group presentations will be spread across classes in December. (20% of grade)

Final Exam. A final exam will take place on December 16. The first part will take place in class over two hours. The second part is written at home and submitted prior to the in-class exam. Both parts are available now on CTools. (30% of grade)

Course Texts:


Policies on Late Papers and Missed Classes

Late papers are accepted late, regardless of reason, with a penalty of half a grade per week. The grade penalty is non-negotiable, but one late assignment does not generally hurt the final grade. Missed classes will hurt the class participation grade, also regardless of reason. Students who miss three class sessions must withdraw from the course.

Additional Readings

The remainder of the course readings are available electronically through CTools. You may download and print out these articles at your own convenience. You may also find it useful to have the readings bound or otherwise organized for the course.

COURSE SCHEDULE

September 9: Introduction to the Course

Birnbaum, Chapters 1-4
September 16: Individual Decision Making

March, Chapter 1, “Limited Rationality”


September 23: Decision Making: Rules and Roles

March, Chapter 2, “Rule Following”


September 30: Managing Teams and Groups

March, Chapter 3, “Multiple Actors: Teams and Partners”


Case Study: Harriman College [reading in class]

October 7: Power and Politics in Organizations

Birnbaum, Chapter 6, “The Political Institution”
March, Chapter 4, “Multiple Actors: Conflict and Politics”


Case Study: Coach Knight

October 14: Ambiguity and Organizations

March, Chapter 5, “Ambiguity and Interpretation”
Birnbaum, Chapter 7, “The Anarchical Institution” [optional]


Case Study: University of Colorado

October 21: Structure & Governance

Birnbaum, Chapter 5, “The Bureaucratic Institution”


Case Study: Curriculum Change at Babson College (A)

October 28: Disciplines and Professions


**Case Study:** Texas Tech University [reading in class]

**November 4: Strategy**


**Case Study:** Tulane University

**November 11: Planning and Budgeting**


December 2: Organizational Socialization


Case Study: Student Presentations

December 9: Organizational Culture and Institutions


Case Study: Student Presentations

December 16: Final Exam

Revised: July 12, 2011