



Turned Around by Transformation: *The Remarkable "Comeback" of a Midwestern College*

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Founded in the 1940's as a professional institute, the school evolved into a full-scale liberal arts college by the early 70's. During the 1970's, the school saw steady growth; however, it experienced a period of dramatic enrollment decline from the 1980's into the 1990's. This was partly due to national demographics at that time. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the national pool of high school graduates decreased significantly on an annual basis between the years 1976 and 1985 (Statistical Abstracts of the U.S., 1996). At the same time, other schools seemed to flourish despite those demographics. In this college, faculty numbers also decreased and morale plummeted. Financial difficulties resulted and a visiting team from the accrediting association expressed concerns about academic quality. There were "talks" at high-level meetings of closing the doors. Trustees pondered the direction and future of the institution. A new president was installed. Both formally and informally, strategies were determined to help reverse the downward trends. Those strategies

THE NATIONAL POOL OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

DECREASED SIGNIFICANTLY ON AN ANNUAL BASIS BETWEEN THE YEARS 1976 AND 1985

During the 2000-2001 academic year, one Midwestern college put the finishing touches on a 12 million dollar field house and reported record enrollments for the third straight year. This would not be so remarkable except for the closed-door conversations just a few years ago concerning the school's potential closure. Here is an example of a once-declining institution headed for extinction that has experienced significant turnaround. (At the recommendation of my advisors in this study, I present the school anonymously.)

combined with other internal and external factors seem to have made the difference between closure and success. The school returned to the good degree of growth and health it had previously, and it began to grow beyond. Today, it is one of the fastest-growing institutions in its general region. Just what caused this college to experience such a remarkable turnaround? What strategies were employed? Was there an identifiable driving force? These were questions I sought to answer during a year-long study of the institution. In asking these questions, I discovered a major transformation of the school had occurred — a process led by a new and innovative president who recognized the need for significant change if turnaround were to occur. I believe this study is helpful to the community college movement, especially for those schools currently experiencing decline (O'Banion, 1997).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In thinking about the situation at this Midwestern college, I reviewed several bodies of literature. These informed me in my early direction for the study and served as a reference point. First, I investigated material on organizational culture. I discovered the different perspectives of viewing an organization from a classical, modern, symbolic-interpretive or postmodern point of view (Hatch, 1997). Influenced by my anthropological tendencies, I chose a symbolic-interpretive perspective that viewed organizational culture from the structural, human, political and symbolic windows (Bolman and Deal, 1991).

This literature began to raise different questions in my mind. What was the organizational structure like before the turnaround? What is it like now? What was the interpersonal climate like before and since the key changes? What key changes occurred? Have human resources been viewed differently? Are people managed differently? What political struggles occurred? Were there shifts in power? Were there significant conflicts that needed to be resolved? Did existing coalitions change? Have new coalitions been formed? What political role did the president play? What leadership style and tools were used? (This last question led me into the sub-field of transformational leadership, alerting me to be aware of what characteristics might have been at play.) Have the school's symbols or values changed? How was and is the school viewed by its own constituency? Has this had some influence in the transformation? These were at least some of the issues that were specifically explored throughout this study. As the investigative procedures progressed, other significant questions emerged.

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A SUMMARY NARRATIVE

Research indicates that when the new president came to the institution, he chose first of all to listen. He listened to the concerns of faculty members, students, alumni, administrators and board members. He made it a point to learn the names of faculty members, administrators and staff. For six months, he basically asked for input before drawing any conclusions. By the end of that period, he had a clearer idea of what factors internally affected the institution's decline and what could be done to turn things around. At this juncture, he began using the ideas others had given him in addition to his own. He also talked regularly to the school family by mail and e-mail to stir the school into forward motion.

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE SCHOOL WAS EVALUATED AND REFINED USING TEAM INPUT. THE VISION OF THE COLLEGE WAS CLARIFIED AND PROCLAIMED FREQUENTLY.

A new strategic planning committee was appointed, drawing on the strengths of several gifted personnel. Funds were raised and new donors pursued for key campus projects. In a pivotal board meeting, the president led the way for a wider constituency, major educational briefings for the Board of Trustees, a new governance structure for the institution and greater philosophical freedom for its personnel. With the clarified liberal arts mission statement for the school, broader constituency and a greater freedom for school family, he also resurfaced the possibility of an institutional name change — a name-change which would also create a “new image” for the school.

Hoping to assist a “fellow” institution of higher education faced with the possibility of closure, the president invited the neighboring school to “merge” in principle with the college for the sake of the alumni and what school family yet remained. The so-called “merger” occurred in the form of a “marriage,” with the college taking one more step in the broadening of its constituency. With this final impetus, the school completed a long-term and wide-input name-change process resulting in its crisp new name. This new name provided for the school's wider constituency, symbolized its ongoing focus and figuratively spoke of a fresh start in the life of the organization.

Meanwhile, with the new governance changes, a new provost/executive vice president was appointed to lead the academics of the school and give day-to-day management over the institution's operations. This freed the president to aggressively pursue more friends for the institution and engage in more aggressive fundraising and institutional development. At the same time, the new governance pushed the power flow downward into the ranks of the institution, resulting in a domino effect of significant change. Methods of faculty recruitment, retention and development were enhanced. With the appointment of the provost and creation of the provost's council came a higher quality of the school's academic program, plus a new wedding between the school's curriculum and co-curriculum in student development. A new associate provost implemented a creative discernment policy that took the excessively strict student/faculty life regulations away from the school culture and replaced them with personal liberty and individual responsibility. A new enrollment management team organized and implemented a strategy for quality student recruitment and retention.

As a result of the new level of personnel participation in visioning the school's dream, the school launched an adult continuing education program. Trustees voted to allow the program to serve as an outreach into the community. As such, the commuter program invites all interested adults to apply.

At the same time, the school followed the new president's leadership in recommitment to the institution's historic core values. To increase its institutional accountability and mutual encouragement in these values, the school joined a coalition of some ninety other similar colleges and universities, becoming part of a “larger voice” and field of participation in the world of higher education.

Finally, new facilities, new technology and a new capital campaign have raised the quality of the organization, the image of the organization and the vitality of the organization's culture. With the completion of the multi-million dollar field house in 2000/2001, the turnaround is symbolically complete.

The literature on corporate turnaround also contributed to my understanding of turnaround as an organizational phenomenon. It led me to ask such questions as: Was there a merger involved? What was the role of technology? Are the other factors generally characteristic of corporate turnaround also significant in the college's story? Especially helpful to me were works that included case studies of such companies as AT&T, Chrysler, Coca-Cola, Disneyland, Eastern Air Lines, Eastman Kodak, John Deere and Texas Instruments (Guy, 1989). From these readings I learned of some common ingredients in institutional rejuvenation (Burgher, 1979; Fombrun, 1992; Connor & Lake, 1988; Huse & Cummings, 1985).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach seemed especially appropriate for conducting my investigation because of its nature as a case study (Yin, 1989). I sought to meet the criteria of credibility (trustworthiness) and fairness (authenticity) by implementing a triangulated procedure using multiple sources of evidence. For my study, I decided to use personal interviews, participant observation and written documents.

Through personal interviews, I heard and recorded the stories of twenty individuals who were a part of the fabric of the organization before, during and since the transformation and subsequent turnaround. For my sampling, I chose to interview people on every level of the school: trustees, administrators, faculty, staff and alumni. Interviewing leaders from the constituency also helped provide a perspective of how this institution has been and is being viewed by its external stakeholders. Each interviewee was granted anonymity.

As a participant observer, I attended information meetings, faculty up-date sessions, board meetings, and all-staff meetings for a period of one year (following the crest of the school's transformation and turnaround). I hoped to recognize my own biases, perspectives, presuppositions, personality and political relationships that may have influenced how I interpreted what I heard and saw. These factors were also kept in mind as I observed students, faculty and administration in general for this research and as I conducted interviews. To help insure credibility of this study, I also did the following:

- Granted anonymity to each interviewee, so that honest replies could be solicited.
- Enlisted the collaboration of five members of a focus group who would read and respond to my findings and interpretations throughout the process. These members were from inside and outside the institution, included constituency leaders, researchers and academics, and held varying perspectives of the turnaround phenomenon.
- Entertained alternative perspectives to the turnaround phenomenon and transformation.

I chose to work with the assumption that where an intelligible and plausible account of an event is carefully investigated, especially from multiple documented sources or vantage points, a degree of fairness exists (Sielke, 1994, p. 23). I also understood that the reliability of my own work as a researcher would be increased through careful documentation of the procedures and methods I incorporated all along the way (Miles & Huberman, 1993). For this purpose, I attempted to create an easily retrievable database, including my field notes, archival observations, interview data and documents. I also sought to document all the procedures followed in the data collection process and kept a research journal. In the journal, I not only maintained an account of research procedures, but I also wrote a progressive unfolding of my thoughts, feelings, ideas, questions, comparisons, observations, perceived relationships, tensions and necessary avenues for further investigations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

FINDINGS

It did not take long to discover that the key reason for this college's turnaround was a major school-wide transformation, largely led by its new president. This, to me, was the central conclusion of the study around which all the other observations revolved. The certainty of this conclusion especially came into view when doing a summary narrative of the institution's turnaround.



ASKED THE INDUCTIVE QUESTION, "WHAT HAPPENED?" RATHER THAN SEEKING A POSITIVELY OR NEGATIVELY SKEWED RESPONSE.

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Take a fresh look at your institutional mission statement. Does it need to be updated, revised, adjusted, streamlined or broadened? Use the cooperative input of shared vision to redraft the statement, and then proclaim it with crispness and regularity.

Is there another floundering school similar to yours in the same general geographic area? Is a merger or "marriage" possible that would benefit you both in the pooling of resources? If so, draft a workable plan and timetable for such a merger to occur.

Tap into related markets in your own geographical area such as the adult education market. Are there programs or delivery systems of education your institution could provide that could conceivably increase your enrollment significantly?

Consider an institutional name change. What identity do you wish to have? What image do you hope to create? What symbolic values need to be included in the name? Again, use the cooperative effort of shared vision to discover the best name.

Create or re-create a strategic plan for the overall institution in light of its mission and objectives. Include a master campus design that reflects vision and good hope. Use good principles of long-range planning. Communicate the plan to the institutional family and constituency.

Update student life policies and expectations. Seek to be in touch with the current generation and society. Make bold revisions if necessary, while remaining true to your institutional value system. Articulate what you are doing and why you are doing it. Seek to implement new policies consistently.

Evaluate the effectiveness of your current institutional governance system. Is it the most effective structure for your institution today? Go back to the drawing board. What changes in governance could/would significantly improve the effectiveness of the organization? Are there new offices of leadership that could be created to more effectively meet the institution's objectives?

Has your school gone from a simple recruitment plan to an enrollment management philosophy? Do you have adequate staffing and funding for total enrollment management? Have those in enrollment management been adequately trained? Is retention a key consideration in the enrollment management?

Is your institution making use of the latest educational and communicational technology? What more could/should be done? What provisions could be made for administrators, staff members, faculty members and students? Is there a plan for assimilating more and newer technology into your total operation?

Draft an aggressive fund-raising strategy. Pursue new friends and donors for the institution. Consider the feasibility of a capital campaign. Decide on a tangible "focal piece" for the potential campaign, such as needed technology, facilities renovation, new facilities or faculty endowments.

Image your institution in a fresh way. How do you want to appear to the community? Constituency? Potential markets? Institutional family? Integrate the new image in every aspect related to your institution — publicity, material, facilities, communications, etc. Generate a new enthusiasm for your school's uniqueness and distinctiveness.

Show genuine appreciation for and encourage innovative thinking and creative work. Keep the school family well informed of potential challenges and directions. Create and maintain positive campus morale. Strive to meet the real and felt needs of administrators, staff, faculty and students. Build a strong sense of collaboration and an open, caring community.

Identify and herald your institution's core values. Demonstrate an authentic commitment to those values.

It is hoped that the presentation of this study and its findings can be of practical help to colleges in general and smaller colleges in particular which are in need of resurgence and revitalization.

OPEN UP THE LINES OF INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION. EMPOWER YOUR STAFF AND FACULTY. SHOW GENUINE APPRECIATION.

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