



ACTIVE CONVERGENCE: BREAKING DOWN SILOS AT UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

BY ED CUNLIFF AND JOHN BARTHELL

Once upon a time, not so long ago nor far away, there was a great kingdom with really super people. The ruler had tasked each with being the best in a particular area, and everyone excelled in their appointed domains. Each worked hard to create one component of the perfect model of the human figure.

One made the most exquisite hands—the hands of a piano player and sculptor blended together. Another made arms. The biceps were huge and capable of lifting great weights, and the triceps were as firm as steel. The belly, the work of the belly expert, was supple and gentle and controlled the breath for maximum efficiency. And so it went, one marvelous component as good as the next.

But one day, a passerby walked into the kingdom and asked what the craftspeople were doing. They all responded with great pride about the objects that they were creating. The passerby was greatly impressed and asked if she could see what all the components looked like together. The hand maker laid down an exquisite hand, the arm maker added his contribution, and the belly maker put the belly where she thought it should go. The thigh bone didn't fit well, but it was connected to the hip bone. As you may have guessed, the end product resembled the creation

described by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*. All these marvelous pieces came together in the form of a monster.

Many organizations experience this same problem, especially those that allow silos to be built around functions, products, or services. Luckily, by maintaining a focus on the patients, most hospitals avoid this situation (think of the disaster it would cause otherwise). Sadly, this kind of fragmentation does occur in many nonprofits and higher education institutions, because of the emphasis on singular service areas and disciplines.

A Shared Goal

This is the story of an organization that has attempted to bring the pieces together so that the product is much more appealing and functional than the Frankenstein monster. As in the preceding story, the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) had many well-intentioned and successful programs. As in most institutions of higher education, the system involves many silos: in academics, there are almost as many disciplines as there are faculty, and student activities are such that one barely ends before the next one begins. The Classification of Instructional Programs identifies hundreds of discrete disciplines, creating a climate in which “interdisciplinary” is the anomaly. And natural divisions exist between the areas of academics, student affairs, enrollment management, and administration. Each has a plan and vision of its own to fulfill.

About four years ago, five upper- and mid-level managers from different functional areas at the University of Central Oklahoma came together to discuss an assessment of the student learning process that would ultimately enhance focus and break down

silos. The long-range academic goals included items that were strongly influenced by other units. For instance, Student Services played a pivotal role in the service learning requirement, and the Leadership office was a primary driver in the Leadership minor program. In order to assess progress on the overall goals, the team knew that it needed input from all areas. Through that gathering, a process began that, while it didn't immediately touch on assessment, produced active and systemic convergence.

The first couple of meetings focused on the difficulties of measuring outcomes related to student learning at the “big-picture” level rather than based on grades achieved in specific disciplines. Representatives had special interests in their own areas, but through the initiative, the team recognized one shared goal and value: helping students to learn.

Transformative Learning

What emerged from the process and lit a spark within the participants is what is now referred to at the University of Central Oklahoma as “transformative learning.” People in the organizational development world refer to this as the “superordinate goal.” According to Wikipedia, “Superordinate goals, in psychology, are goals that are achieved by the contribution and cooperation of two or more people, with individual goals that are normally in opposition to each other working together.” While each division or program was considered successful in its own right, the participants in the change process had a vision that the synergistic act of collaboration would have greater rewards for students and the university.

This transformative learning model

TEAM TIP

What is your team's or your organization's superordinate goal?

that began four years ago continues to evolve. It centers on the mission of helping students learn. It includes what are known at UCO as “the Central Six” major themes: discipline knowledge (the student’s major); leadership; service learning and civic engagement; global and cultural competencies; health and wellness; and research, creative, and scholarly activities.

For each of these themes, students engage in learning more than they would in traditional lecture-format classes. Several of the themes are “high-impact practices,” as research has identified them as contributing to student success, shown in retention and graduation rates. One example would be the Service Learning component, in which a student or class is actively involved in a community program, at times for credit and sometimes not. The Undergraduate Research program, in which a student works directly with a faculty member on a research project, is another illustration.

Active Convergence

The “active convergence” that led to the transformative learning model did not happen through any analysis of causal loops or grand visioning, but somewhat serendipitously through a series of conversations characterized by open communication, a commitment to listening to each other, and the willingness to set aside egos and personal ownership of organizational turf. This process had both a sense of disruption, in that people went beyond their professional boundaries, and an “aha” moment, in that they recognized the real value and meaning of organizational synergy. Ultimately, though, it was probably good fortune and good people that enabled the shift to happen.

The synergy has been best exemplified in UCO’s Centre for Global Competencies. As a result of the process, the university created an office to support international students coming to UCO as well as nationals interested in study-abroad opportunities

(previously, these two functions weren’t linked). This type of collaboration benefits students and produces financial efficiencies that are critical in the current climate of reduced funding.

By nature, humans seek to preserve their turf and resources. Tight financial times can exacerbate the desire to create walls for self preservation. While this siloing may initially feel safe, the long-term impact is harmful to the organization.

The active convergence at UCO resists the siloing and allows for greater innovation and transformation. The keys to this effort include a focus on the superordinate goal of helping student learn, a desire to listen to others, and an appreciation for the benefits of a synergistic approach. ■

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