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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of the issues facing a hypothetical university that is attempting to devise and implement a multicultural core curriculum. It focuses on the actions of the chair of the Academic Affairs Council of the university, who must work with the Council and the Faculty Senate to develop the core curriculum. After allowing faculty representatives from a number of minority groups to have input on the curriculum change, the Council voted to add two new categories of courses to the core curriculum to meet the multicultural requirement. To the chairman's surprise, the faculty senate approves the measure by only a narrow margin after heated debate. A groundswell of protest to the move arises from many students, faculty, parents, and alumni of the conservative institution. The president of the university then threatens to veto the curriculum change, an unprecedented move. After presenting the case, the paper analyzes the chairman's leadership skills, criticizing his unwillingness to foster a truly participatory, open atmosphere before, during, and after the decision-making process. Specific actions that the chairman took are examined, along with alternatives that would have allowed the decision-making process to work more effectively. (MDM)

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# Implementation of a Multicultural Curriculum: A Case Study

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# Implementation of a Multicultural Curriculum: A Case Study

G. CLINTON GRIDER, JR.

## ABSTRACT

Robert Blackmon, chair of the Academic Affairs Council at Conservative State University (CSU), was distraught. He only had an hour and a half to formulate recommendations to combat the President's essential "veto" of a core curriculum change approved by the Faculty Senate. How could there be so much turmoil when the issue had originally seemed to be so cut-and-dried?

Acting upon a general Faculty Senate resolution which stated that CSU should implement a multicultural curriculum, Robert had allowed faculty representatives from a number of minority groups to have input. After a significant amount of discussion, the Council voted to recommend that two new categories be added to the core curriculum. Students would be required to take six hours from an extensive and flexible list of options dealing with diversity issues. The length of the current core would be unchanged, since the courses that students chose from the new categories would also count toward other applicable categories.

After a heated discussion, the Faculty Senate narrowly accepted the proposal, and forwarded it to the President for routine approval. However, students, parents, and alumni began to adamantly protest the change, and in an unprecedented move, the President acted outside of his traditional authority by refusing to accept the Senate's decision.

## SETTING

Conservative State University was, indeed, a bastion of conservatism. For decades, the land-grant institution had predominantly attracted middle to upper class Anglo students from strong academic backgrounds. Of the 27,000 students at CSU, 85% claimed to be "politically and culturally conservative." Students

remained extremely loyal to the eminent traditions and influence of their school even after graduation, as evidenced by the enormous and active alumni association.

The institution enjoyed consistently strong public and private financial support and regularly attracted notable faculty to its academic ranks. Although it was aggressively attempting to diversify its student, faculty, and administrative populations, CSU's ethnic, racial, and gender statistics showed only minuscule amounts of improvement each year. Still, most of the faculty and administrators felt that they were making progress, and that the future was bright.

### NARRATIVE CASE

It was late Wednesday morning, and Robert Blackmon was exasperated. As chair of the Academic Affairs Council at Conservative State University (CSU), Robert had been charged to coordinate the implementation of more diverse course offerings in the University's core curriculum. Although he had known that the process could be lengthy and complex, he had no idea that it would be *this* difficult.

The impetus for the core curriculum change came three years ago when the Faculty Senate accepted a three-inch thick university-wide report that, among other things, included a short resolution drafted by the Committee for a Discrimination-Free Campus. The main portion of the resolution simply stated that CSU "should have a multicultural curriculum to give individuals the opportunity to learn about a variety of racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural minorities." Recognizing that students would need this preparation in order to most effectively compete in an ever-shrinking global society, the Faculty Senate had no problems with the resolution and approved it along with the rest of the report.

Apparently giving way to more pressing faculty objectives, the broadly-stated resolution sat for over a year without any action. After that period, the Speaker of the Faculty Senate asked Robert if anything had been done about the

recommendation. Robert responded by saying that the Council hadn't yet gotten to it, but that he would bring it up in the next monthly meeting. Over the next six months, Robert reserved approximately 15-20 minutes per meeting to discuss the issue.

During these time slots, faculty representatives from a number of minority groups were invited to share their viewpoints regarding a more diverse core curriculum. Some individuals desired that *new* courses dealing exclusively with racial, ethnic, and gender issues be added to the core curriculum requirements. Others thought that the creation of such courses would be too costly and controversial and recommended that existing university courses which *partially* dealt with minority issues be included. Still others preferred a required freshman-level "diversity colloquium," that would offer a seminar/discussion format to the requirement. After discussing the matter, the Council voted to propose that two new categories be added to the core curriculum.

According to the recommendation, students would be required to take a total of six hours emphasizing cultural diversity--three relating to international cultures and three relating to American racial, ethnic, and gender issues. Students would select these classes from over 70 existing university courses that dealt with minority or international issues at least 33 percent of the time (e.g., Texas History, International Economics). The total length of the current 48-hour core curriculum would not be affected; the courses that students chose from the new categories would simply count as requirements from other applicable categories as well (i.e., "double-count"). The recommendation would be voted upon by the Faculty Senate and then, if affirmed, would be forwarded to the President for routine approval.

Robert remembered feeling quite smug about the proposal. Although he assumed that there would be some discussion at the next Faculty Senate meeting, he thought that the recommendation would be approved by a large margin. After all,

the Council had received input from virtually every faculty sector, and had reached a compromise that was positive in most respects. Faculty members would not have to invest the time and resources to create new classes. Furthermore, the requirement would provide an indirect incentive for all professors to relate their course material to diversity issues (i.e., if at least a third of a course's material pertained to multiculturalism, the course would be added to the multicultural list and, thus, become more attractive to students throughout the university). Robert also felt that students would not mind the requirement, since it would not lengthen their degree plans and since they would have so many options from which to choose.

Unfortunately, Robert's smugness was somewhat curtailed when Sherry Smith, a member of the Executive Council voiced her concern about the proposal at the Faculty Senate meeting. A professor of sociology, Sherry *had* been in favor of a CSU multicultural requirement until she had recently begun a study examining similar universities that had done the same thing. As an example of her concerns, Sherry stated that she had received a 16-page letter from a student at a university who said that since multiculturalism hit his campus, that he had been exposed to a political agenda in most of his classes. She said that the student wrote about courses in which only an extremely liberal view of that discipline was presented and where any student voicing a differing opinion was chastised. "Implementing a multicultural core curriculum is not right," she said. "It becomes indoctrination instead of education. Curriculum changes would be implemented by individual professors--for us to think that multicultural requirements would be carried out the way we *hope* is not realistic." A number of faculty members voiced their agreement, which sparked a lengthy discussion. The debate was heated at times, and the Senate was clearly divided on the issue. Robert was relieved, if not ecstatic when the proposal was passed, albeit by an extremely slim margin.

Now, as a growing number of students marched outside of his window carrying signs exclaiming "Defeat Political Correctness!", Robert realized that he shouldn't have been relieved at all. In fact, he was quite disturbed. Why was everyone so upset about such a relatively minor and flexible curricular change? Earlier that morning, he had received a fax from the alumni center expressing serious concern regarding the issue. Apparently, the phones were ringing off the hook as alumni called to voice their disapproval. Additionally, the Student Senate had forwarded him a statement that protested the requirement of *both* an international and a cultures course. Furthermore, Robert had just spoken with a student leader's mother on the phone who bellowed that she would "not allow her son to be required to take your homosexual course!"

As he closed his mini-blinds, Robert knew that, in spite of all of this, the new requirements were essentially a done deal. After all, the Faculty Senate *had* accepted the proposal, and after receiving the President's customary approval, would be implemented the next school year. Sure, it would take a little while for people to get used to the idea, but once they understood . . . Just then the phone rang. It was the Faculty Senate Speaker. "Robert! The President is not going to sign the proposal--he's crossing the line into curricular matters and is not going to sign it! This is unprecedented--the President at this university has never acted outside of his authority by questioning faculty governance. We need you to make recommendations at an emergency Executive Council meeting this afternoon at 1:00."

### CASE ANALYSIS

In this case study, the major issue involves Robert's unwillingness to foster a truly participatory, open atmosphere before, during, and after the decision-making process. This symptom may be a sign of a larger problem throughout the university's organizational structure. His uncertainty on how to proceed with the

situation (as well as his persistent downplaying of constituent concerns) is the sub-issue that has revealed the underlying problem at hand.

### MAJOR ISSUE CONTENT

- Robert did not act on the Faculty Senate's initial resolution until over a year had passed.
- After the Speaker reminded him about the resolution, Robert only set aside 15-20 minutes per monthly meeting to discuss it.
- During these time slots, Robert only invited various *faculty* members to offer input.
- Surprisingly to Robert, the proposal was debated extensively at the Faculty Senate meeting, and was approved by only the narrowest of margins.
- Virtually all of the university's constituent groups expressed serious concern about the passage of the proposal.
- The President, in an unprecedented move, decided to not approve the proposal until further studies were completed. Traditionally, the President would never question faculty governance by crossing over into curricular matters (i.e., he/she would always routinely approve Faculty Senate recommendations related to curriculum, academic affairs, etc.).

### MAJOR ISSUE PROCESS

- Robert did not allow enough time in any of the Council's meetings to fully explore the issue. Since the Council members did not seem to object to this, this pattern had apparently existed for some time.
- Although he *thought* that he was effectively obtaining input, Robert actually held tight reins on the Council's internal and external communication. Even the faculty as a whole were not adequately included, as seen during the heated



debate at the Faculty Senate meeting. His manipulative nature was further evidenced by his thoughts that the proposal would covertly encourage *all* faculty to alter their course content.

- Robert did not seek involvement from the university's various constituent groups. Even though curricular issues are traditionally faculty matters, Robert should have known that this would be controversial, and therefore, should have been careful to include students, alumni, administrators, etc. Robert *assumed* that students and faculty would like the proposal, and didn't even consider other constituent groups.
- Robert viewed the President's approval of Faculty Senate recommendations to be "routine." Due to the controversial nature of this issue, Robert should have openly communicated with the President's Office every step of the way (the President's support would have been necessary to answer to constituencies).
- Robert's leadership style had apparently been reinforced at the institution, as evidenced by his key position in the Faculty Senate and by the Speaker's immediate looking to him for recommendations. This points to a larger leadership problem that may exist in chief university positions or throughout the organizational structure.

#### SUB-ISSUE CONTENT

- Even though the proposal was approved by the Faculty Senate, a significant number of faculty members were unhappy with the decision. Furthermore, students, alumni, and parents were vehemently expressing their displeasure about the proposal.

### SUB-ISSUE PROCESS

- Robert must decide what recommendations to make at the emergency Executive Council meeting. He must deal with his denial of the problem, and decide how to effectively communicate with the various university constituencies (including the administration).

### SOME OF ROBERT'S ALTERNATIVES

- Continue to deny that a major problem exists with the constituencies and recommend that the Faculty Senate go to battle with the President to push the proposal through.
- Accept that the constituencies have a problem with the proposal, but deem it to be *their* problem since they can't do anything to the faculty. Go to battle with the President.
- Communicate with the President in order to reach a compromise.
- Communicate with the President *and* all constituent groups in a comprehensive and understanding way in order to determine the true issues at hand, and to reach a satisfactory resolution.

### RECOMMENDATION

- Communicate with the President *and* all constituent groups in a comprehensive and understanding way in order to determine the true issues at hand, and to reach a satisfactory resolution.

Robert must stop denying that a major problem exists (e.g., surprise at Faculty Senate debate, feeling that the proposal was a "done deal", closing mini-blinds to shut out students, etc.), and realize that something must be done to communicate what the recommendation is really all about. His belief that the change is a

relatively minor addition to the core curriculum is probably accurate; however, no one else seems to know what it actually entails. The outbursts by constituent groups resulted from a lack of participatory involvement and open communication throughout the decision-making process. Consequently, individuals' worst fears became rumors that spread like wildfire (e.g., mother's statement that she wouldn't allow her son to be required to take a "homosexual course"). Robert should recommend that the Executive Council meet with the President and begin to communicate openly and visibly with all constituencies. Because this type of atmosphere wasn't fostered in the beginning, the road to recovery will be a long but necessary one.

#### SAMPLE PRINCIPLES FOR LEADERSHIP

- Effective leaders foster an atmosphere that encourages open communication throughout the entire organizational structure.
- Individuals have a sense of value and self-worth when they are allowed to contribute to (and to be *heard* by) the organization (e.g., participatory decision making).
- Effective leaders openly discuss issues with stakeholders to receive input from all who are directly or indirectly affected and to avoid an unclear, ambiguous environment.
- When disagreement arises, good leaders communicate with their followers honestly and straightforwardly in order to help bring the *true* issues at hand into the open.