University Planning: A Conceptual Challenge

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ABSTRACT

Most authorities on educational planning and change recognize that each situation is somewhat unique and that in complex organizations, like universities, a blend of approaches is necessary. Following the premise of the need for universities to approach planning from multiple perspectives, the purpose of this paper is to briefly explore the unique nature of universities and how this helps to define the considerations that must be taken into account when deciding which planning approaches should be used.

To accomplish this purpose, two primary frameworks are blended: Birnbaum's classic text on the characteristics of universities and Bolman and Deal's four frames for analyzing organizations (structural, human resource, political, and cultural). Against this backdrop, various approaches to educational planning are examined, e.g., incremental, bounded rational, comprehensive rational, mixed scanning, and developmental, to discern the situations and conditions under which they are appropriate for university planning. The overall conclusion is that due to the complexity of university characteristics and the need to examine the university's needs and conditions through each of the four frames, university planners must be well versed in all approaches in order to select the one(s) most appropriate for a particular planning endeavor.

INTRODUCTION

Some authors, especially those whose work is based on the strategic planning model (Bryson, 2011; Cook, 1990), seem to advocate that their approach, with minor modifications, is applicable almost universally. However, most authorities on educational planning and change recognize that each situation is somewhat unique and that in complex organizations, like universities, a blend of approaches is necessary (Kezar, 2001). Following the premise of the need for universities to approach planning from multiple perspectives, the purpose of this paper is to briefly explore the unique nature of universities and how this helps to define the considerations that must be taken into account when deciding which planning approaches should be used.

CHARACTERISTICS OF UNIVERSITIES

Birnbaum's (1991), *How Colleges Work: The Cybernetics of Academic Organizations and Leadership*, is generally recognized as the classic test defining the characteristics of universities. In that text, Birnbaum discussed both characteristics of universities in general and how universities each have their own unique characteristics. Birnbaum conceptualized universities through the general systems model and cautioned that their characteristics should not be considered individually, but rather as they interact to form the identity of that university. Various of Birnbaum's characteristics are examined in this paper in an effort to discern their implications for university planning.

Framing Planning

Just as Birnbaum's text is considered the classic work on the characteristics of universities, Bolman and Deal's (2008) text is the most cited regarding lenses for analyzing educational organizations. These authors advocated examining organizations through four *frames*: structural, human resource, political, and cultural. These were derived, respectively: from the work of rational systems theorists, who focused on organizational goals, roles, technologies, and structures; from the work of human resource theorists, who examined the fit between people and the organization; from the work of political theorists, who looked at issues of power, conflict, and the distribution of scarce resources; and from the work of symbolic theorists, who focused on the organizational culture. Bolman and Deal advocated that all organizational analyses, including educational planning, should consider all four frames in deciding a course of action. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between Birnbaum's characteristics of universities and Bolman and Deal's four frames. It is through this combined framework that the conceptual challenges of university planning will be examined.

UNIVERSITY PLANNING

Change occurs in universities in two major ways, planned and unplanned; this discussion is delimited to planned change. As Wheatley (1999) noted, all organizations move toward chaos in ways they do not fully understand, one form of evolutionary change. Only when the threat of chaos becomes compelling do most organizations leave their preferred comfort state of homeostasis (Burke, 2010; Weick, 2000, 2009) and re-organize – which may include planned change. There are two major forms of change: teleological and evolutionary (Kezar, 2001). Teleological change refers to sporadic, episodic planned change, whereas evolutionary change is adaptive, on-going change, where distinct planning episodes are less detectable.

Planning Approaches for the Two Forms of Change

Certain planning approaches lend well to teleological change. Prime among these are the *comprehensive rational* approach (Benveniste, 1991; Brieve, Johnston, & Young, 1958; Kaufman, 1972; Sergiovanni, Burlingame, Coombs, & Thurston, 1980; Simon, 1955, 1957) and the *bounded rational* approach (March & Simon, 1959; Simon, 1982; 1997). Within these, a popular planning model for universities is the *strategic planning* model (Beach & Lindahl, 2004; Bryson, 2011; Cook, 1990; Mintzberg, 1994). All call for the discernment of goals and the selection of an optimal or perhaps a *satisficing* (March & Simon), alternative solution as to how to achieve those goals. The difference between comprehensive and bounded rationalism is that in the comprehensive approach, planners strive to fully understand the environment and the university and seek to identify, and select from, a maximum variety of solutions. The bounded rational approach assumes that the university does not have sufficient time, resources, or ability to conduct a truly comprehensive planning process and that it is not possible to know with certainty the consequences of selecting each alternative. Instead, the planning process focuses on a more limited set of core issues, conditions, and alternatives that lie within the realm of feasibility and satisfice by electing a reasonably effective plan rather than holding out for an optimal plan.

Structural Frame	Human Resource Frame
Interdependent Organizations	Employee Commitment and Tenure
Relatively Independent of the Environment Goal Ambiguity	Cosmopolitans and Locals Highly Educated Professional Staff, Less Educated Support Staff
Loosely Coupled System	
Organized Anarchical Decision Making	
Paucity and Inflexibility of Resources	
Clarity of Vision and Mission	
Political Frame	**Cultural Frame**
Institutional Status, Image, and Success	Unique Culture of the Academy Low Accountability
Uncertainty and Conflict in Governance Roles	
Multiple Power and Authority Structures	Values Driven
Shared Governance	Professor versus Administrator Values

Figure 1. Conceptual framework, based on the work of Bolman and Deal, and Birnbaum.

Other planning approaches lend themselves to evolutionary change. Prime among these are the *incremental planning* approach (Lindblom, 1959) and the *developmental,* or *goal-free planning* approach (Clark, 1981; Clark, Lotto, & Astuto, 1989; Senge, 1990). The incremental approach uses a relatively limited amount of information in identifying a goal and calls for ongoing, small advances toward that goal. It offers the advantage of calling for individuals to make only relatively minor, but ongoing, changes in behaviors and values.

A related, but distinct, planning approach, developmental or goal-free planning, is also well suited to evolutionary change. In this approach, planners identify directions, or thrusts, in which they would like the university to move. These are broader and less specific than traditional goals. Then, the individuals within the organization are challenged and guided to determine how they, personally or in units, can help the university move in the agreed-upon direction. For example, if a university determined that it wants to increase undergraduate student retention, how can faculty members contribute to that? How can the Registrar? How can financial aid conselors? How can residence hall staff? Each contributes in their own unique way.

Etzioni (1967) recognized that organizations need to have, and employ, a varied repertoire of planning approaches at any given time. There are needs that require teleological change, whereas others are better served through evolutionary change. Therefore, Etzioni introduced the *mixed scanning* approach to planning. In this approach, evolutionary change would be addressed by incremental planning, while at the same time teleological changes would be addressed through a rational planning approach, comprehensive or bounded.

If most university faculty and administrators were asked what type of planning occurs on their campus, the overwhelming reply would be *strategic planning*, a form of teleological planning. However, this would likely be deceiving. Faculty and administrators generally know about the university's strategic plan because it has been given extensive public recognition, is prominent on the university's web site, and is used to satisfy accrediting agency requirements. Departments and administrative offices are often required to develop similar teleological plans that link to the university strategic plan. Similarly, if the university plans a major expansion of its facilities, a similar teleological plan is developed and disseminated.

However, most university faculty and administrators are unaware of the other major approaches to educational planning and of their prevalence on university campuses. Universities definitely take a mixed scanning approach to their planning. In addition to teleological strategic and facilities plans, budgets are largely planned incrementally, as are staffing plans. Adding an estimated inflationary percentage to budgets for utilities, supplies, health care insurance, etc. is by far the most common practice among universities; very few use more teleological budget planning processes like zero-based budgeting.

Moreover, relatively few faculty and administrators are acquainted with evolutionary planning approaches such as developmental or goal-free planning, yet this is the most common form of planning at the department or program level. Programs and departments form shared visions and missions but seldom dictate what each faculty member must do to contribute to their attainment. Faculty have, and exercise, considerable freedom in determining how (and even to what extent once they have become tenured) to best contribute to the vision and mission of the program or department.

The purpose of this article is to explore the complexity of university planning processes, examine some of the variables that help to determine which planning process(es) may be most appropriate under specific circumstances, and to counterbalance the myth that strategic planning is universally accepted as *best practice*.

UNIVERSITY PLANNING VIEWED THROUGH THE STRUCTURAL FRAME

In looking at university planning from the structural frame, certain university characteristics assume key roles. First is the fact that universities are interdependent organizations. This forces the planner to look beyond the university to those other organizations in its environment that directly or indirectly shape what happens within the university. For example, what are the standards of the accrediting agencies that govern the university or specific programs within it? What are the governmental regulations that determine what the university must or cannot do? What are the standards of the various professional organizations that faculty members belong to in their respective disciplines? Such an analysis requires a teleological form of planning.

In regard to the general characteristic of universities being relatively independent of the environment (Birnbaum, 1991), planners must take careful measure of the extent to

which this is true of their university. For many public universities, this is indeed the case. Surely, shifts in public demand for specific programs may occasion the development of new programs and the possible decline of others, but this is essentially adaptive, first-order change (Argyris, 1994) and requires only minor teleological planning. However, other universities may be far more dependent on the environment, e.g., on-line, for-profit universities that survive through competitive, aggressive matching of resources and offerings to current demands.

Goal ambiguity is another characteristic of university culture. Birnbaum (1991, p. 155) cited the example of the goal of preparing students who are "liberally educated" and noted the wide variations of definitions of what this means, making it difficult, if not impossible, to establish firm targets around this goal. Birnbaum added that university goals often arise from actions rather than actions arising from planned goals. Goals are more a loose collection of ideas than firm targets. Again, this makes teleological planning difficult and lends itself more to evolutionary planning.

Birnbaum (1991) defined universities as loosely coupled systems (Morgan, 2006; Weick, 2000, 2009). However, they may more accurately be described as having simultaneous loose-tight properties (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Loosely coupled systems are largely uncoordinated and have high degrees of specialization within their units, whereas tightly coupled systems are far more centralized and less differentiated. Organizations with simultaneous loose-tight properties combine these two modes of operation. For example, the administrative side of most universities tends to be far tighter than the loosely coupled academic side. On the administrative side, there tends to be a high degree of centralized, bureaucratic control. Among academic units, there is often very limited communication or control, even within the same department or college. This dichotomy requires careful attention on the part of university planners. It is much easier to accomplish evolutionary change in the loosely coupled academic side of the university, as one program might elect to change as its national standards change, yet this would not require any changes in neighboring units. Because of the tightly coupled systems of the administrative side of universities, planning must be more teleological, as the implications of planned change must be considered for all units and processes.

Birnbaum (1991) discussed university decision making as an organized anarchy, in which instructors decide what to teach, students decide what to learn, and legislators and donors decide what to support. Neither coordination nor control are exercised and resources are allocated without specific reference to goals (p. 153). Birnbaum further characterized universities as having unclear goals, unclear technology (e.g., Why are some lectures effective and others not? Is small group work more effective than lectures or laboratory activities? In which subjects?), and fluid participation (e.g., committee membership changing or partial attendance at meetings). These characteristics clearly favor evolutionary planning processes, as all would mitigate against the success of teleological processes.

A further characteristic attributed to universities is a paucity and an inflexibility of resources. The personnel component of universities represents a huge, immutable portion of their usually meager budgets. This, along with fixed costs such as utilities, leaves very little discretionary funding available for new projects, a factor that suggests that evolutionary planning will have a better chance of success than its teleological counterpart, for teleological planning tends to require greater up-front funding.

Closely aligned to this characteristic is Birnbaum's (1991) characterization of

universities as engaging in organized anarchical decision-making, which has also been referred to as a garbage can model of decision making (Cohen & March, 1974; Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). This comes about because of ambiguity in universities, ambiguity of power and authority (Kezar, 2001). Planners must discern whether academic units have sufficient power and authority to implement planned changes or whether those changes require external authority, e.g., the Provost, the Board, the state regulatory body, or the regional accrediting agency. Beyond that, who has the power and authority to fund the planned changes?

Within the structural frame, the vision and mission of the university is the final, and perhaps most important, characteristic that planners must consider. Most teleological planning models begin the process by comparing the changes under consideration with the university's vision and mission. Unless there is strong congruity, those alternatives that do not align well are immediately dropped from consideration. Even in more developmental or adaptive planning models, universities are not likely to evolve in directions contrary to the mission and vision of the university. However, although virtually all universities have published vision and mission statements, many are so formulaic as to be meaningless. Certainly, not all employees of a university may share the same vision or mission, regardless of what is published. For example, this author works at an Historically Black University in the Southeast. Until the past several decades, its mission and vision were fairly well clear and shared by all. It provided education to bright Black students who were denied access to predominately White universities. Its primary focus was on teacher education, as it was consistently one of the top providers of Black educators in the nation. Recently, however, bright Black students are welcomed, and often given scholarships, in White universities. Consequently, the pool of highly qualified Black students is dispersed, perhaps causing entrance standards at this university to be lower in an effort to maintain enrollment. This Historically Black University is under pressure to attract both White and Black students; to do this, it implemented a series of highly visible, highly attractive graduate programs in areas like forensics, micro-biology, orthotics, and physical and occupational therapy, shifting some of the focus from teacher preparation. Needless to say, this has wreaked havoc on shared understanding of mission and vision.

UNIVERSITY PLANNING VIEWED THROUGH THE HUMAN RESOURCE FRAME

Universities are somewhat unusual organizations because of the tenure process. Once tenured, usually after six years in higher education, faculty members have tremendous job security. Anything short of committing an egregious act or the complete shutdown of a program, tenured faculty members have the expectation of perpetual employment in that university, if they so choose. This characteristic favors evolutionary planning, as the university does not have great influence to force tenured faculty members into major teleological changes.

Birnbaum (1991) noted that there are two major mindsets among university faculty – *cosmopolitans* and *locals* (Gouldner, 1957). Cosmopolitans tend to use their wider profession as their primary frame of reference, whereas locals tend to view their specific university as their frame of reference. In terms of planning, locals tend to resist change more ardently, suggesting a need for evolutionary planning. Cosmopolitans, on the other

hand, are more open to sweeping new ideas from the wider profession and might readily see the need for teleological planning and deeper changes. However, as both types co-exist within most universities, this increases the dilemma of selecting a planning approach.

Similarly, a characteristic of universities is the noted differences in education levels between faculty, most of whom have terminal degrees in their field, and support staff, who typically have lower education levels (and lower salaries). This schism suggests that developmental or goal-free planning may be appropriate, as each individual contributes in his or her own way rather than having formal goals set for the university as a whole, as would be more the case in teleological planning.

UNIVERSITY PLANNING VIEWED THROUGH THE POLITICAL FRAME

Institutional status is a key characteristic of universities, and one that must be considered in planning. There are a multitude of factors that influence status, image, and success. Is the institution a flagship, Research Intensive university? If it is a small liberal arts university, has it attained a reputation for exclusivity and excellence? Is it a *directional* university, meaning a regional state university whose status is inferior to the state's flagship(s)? Is the university a major recipient of federal grants? Does the university have a law school or medical schools? The higher status and more success a university has, the more likely it can attempt large-scale teleological changes, e.g., allowing the entire world free access to all on-line courses and materials, as is happening at some of America's premier universities.

Birnbaum (1991) characterized universities as having uncertainty and conflict in governance roles and multiple power and authority structures. At most universities, the faculty feel that they participate in collective governance, especially over academic issues. However, most major academic issues must receive administrative approval, e.g., the Provost, the President, or even the Board. Faculty may plan and approve curricular initiatives, but funding rests in hands of administrators. In unionized universities, governance may be highly conflictive and very much governed by the signed union contract. Determining where governance truly lies on each issue is a crucial, early step in any university planning process, but more so in teleological processes.

Similarly, shared governance is a characteristic somewhat unique to universities. Virtually all universities have a Faculty Senate, where shared governance is institutionalized. Many Faculty Senates are quite powerful, including the ability to influence the removal of a President through votes of no confidence. Others are far less effective due to a powerful central administration or board. At college, department, and program levels, shared governance is a norm at most universities, although at some universities it is only partial, as power differentials among faculty members (e.g., prestige, rank, and tenure) come into prominent play. The more shared governance, the more likely developmental or goal-free planning can lead to the desired ends. Less shared governance and more hierarchical governance structures lend themselves more to teleological planning.

UNIVERSITY PLANNING VIEWED THROUGH THE CULTURAL FRAME

The final frame of Bolman and Deal's (2008) model is the cultural frame. As the culture of universities often differs significantly from other organizations, it is important to examine those characteristics of universities identified by Birnbaum (1991) that relate to university culture.

The first of these characteristics is the overall culture of the academy; once again, however, it is essential to understand that although universities may share some general cultural similarities, each has a unique culture that must be understood for effective planning to occur. Some universities have very strong cultures, yet others have weaker, more fragmented cultures. Birnbaum (1991) noted that universities exist within a hierarchical system. Consequently, their cultures are affected by the cultures of the national education system, the culture of the academic profession, the cultures of the various disciplines, the cultures of the peer system of comparable institutions, etc. (p. 73). Each university has its own myths, stories, legends, and symbols (p. 74). All must be taken into account, especially in teleological planning. In evolutionary planning, changes are planned to be incremental or developmental; consequently, it is less likely that they will pose a serious threat to the university culture.

One general aspect of university culture is that they have low accountability. For many majors, there are no state or national examinations that would allow comparisons across universities. Graduation rates are generally only posted for athletes. Because entrance requirements vary greatly among universities, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to compare the effectiveness of their education processes. This cultural facet makes it difficult to set certain goals, necessary in teleological planning and lends itself more to setting general directions, as in evolutionary planning.

Finally, university cultures tend to be values driven. As Birnbaum (1991, p. 55) stated, "A goal is a value premise – a statement of what 'should' be that is meant to help guide decisions." However, there are many value premises in a university, some expressed, some latent, some widely held, others less so. Some are conflicting, which prevents goal optimization. It is quite common that administrators may have competing values with those of faculty members. Faculty often clamor for smaller class sizes, especially at the undergraduate level where hundreds of students may be placed in a single class. Administrators, on the other hand, welcome the cost savings of larger classes. This cultural characteristic, too, favors evolutionary planning over teleological planning. If teleological planning is used, the bounded rational approach would be proper, in that it allows for the satisficing of goals within the competing values of the university's culture.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, because universities have so many unique characteristics, there is no single approach to planning that would be a panacea. Instead, as Etzioni (1967) posited, a blend of evolutionary and teleological planning approaches must be utilized. In order to determine which to use in any given circumstance, planners must examine the university through all four frames of Bolman and Deal's (2008) model. They must look at the key characteristics of that university and forecast how they might interact among themselves and with the planning process. Truly, university planning is a conceptual challenge! Figure 2 below provides a visual representation of these relationships and complexity.

University Characteristic	Primary Frame	Probable Planning Approach
High Interdependence with Accrediting Agencies, Professional Standards, and Governmental Regulations	Structural	Teleological
Low Interdependence with Accrediting Agencies, Professional Standards, and Governmental Regulations	Structural	Evolutionary
High Independence from the Environment	Structural	Teleological
Low Independence from the Environment	Structural	Evolutionary or Mixed Scanning
High Goal Ambiguity	Structural	Evolutionary
Low Goal Ambiguity	Structural	Teleological
Loosely Coupled	Structural	Evolutionary
Tightly Coupled	Structural	Teleological
Organized Anarchy	Structural	Evolutionary
Sufficient and/or Flexible Resources	Structural	Teleological
Insufficient and/or Inflexible Resources	Structural	Evolutionary
Clear Vision and Mission	Structural	Evolutionary
Ambiguous Vision and Mission	Structural	Teleological
High Institutional Status and Success	Political	Teleological
Low Institutional Status and Success	Political	Evolutionary
High Shared Governance	Political	Evolutionary
Low Shared Governance	Political	Teleological
Strong Shared Culture	Cultural	Evolutionary
Weak Shared Culture	Cultural	Teleological
Highly Values Driven	Cultural	Evolutionary
Weakly Values Driven	Cultural	Teleological
Strong Division between Faculty and Administrative Values	Cultural	Teleological
Little Division between Faculty and Administrative Values	Cultural	Evolutionary
Strong Division between Faculty and Staff	Human Resource	Teleological
Weak Division between Faculty and Staff	Human Resource	Evolutionary
High Faculty Commitment and Tenure Rates	Human Resource	Evolutionary
Low Faculty Commitment and Tenure Rates	Human Resource	Teleological

Figure 2. University characteristics, primary frames, and probable planning approaches.

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