

Navigating Change with a Flexible Portfolio

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This case study demonstrates how building a flexible portfolio of services allowed a continuing education (CE) unit to thrive during frequent leadership changes. The case is set in a small state college, State Technology Institute at Mohawk (STIM), which experienced nine leadership changes in as many years. The names of the institution and its leaders are changed to protect their privacy. All other details are based on actual events that occurred between 1999 and 2009. The lessons learned by the Continuing Professional Education and Sponsored Research (CPE/SR) staff may prove helpful to others experiencing similar frequent changes.

Though multiple leadership changes can be more disruptive than beneficial as adaptation to repeated changes threatens the stability of the CE organization, the case study shows that occasional changes in institutional leadership offer continuing education programs opportunities for growth and diversification—assuming the CE unit can adapt to the incoming leader’s new values, goals, and objectives.

THE INSTITUTION

The State Technology Institute at Mohawk is unique among the 64 campuses of the state university system. The college offers bachelor’s and master’s degrees in business, nursing, selected social sciences, and a range of technologies and engineering. Originally an all-transfer upper-division college, its mission expanded in 2000 to encompass the four years of the bachelor’s degree along with an expanded suite of graduate programs. STIM is slated to grow its enrollment from 2,000 to 4,000 students, and the physical campus to double in size by 2015.

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One of the most visible changes between 1999 and 2009 was the number of executives leading the institution: four presidents and five provosts in total. Since the office of Continuing Professional Education and Sponsored Research reports to the provost, leadership changes resulted in nine different sets of values and expectations guiding the CPE/SR program during a 10-year period. The program's survival required a nimble approach and a resilient team with the skills and knowledge necessary to adapt to internal and external changes.

OFFICE OF CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND SPONSORED RESEARCH

STIM had dismantled its successful continuing education program in 1991 during a state budget crisis. The CE unit was viewed as superfluous to the institution and garnered little support on campus. In 1994 when a new sponsored research director was selected, she negotiated the option to begin a CE program after building a successful sponsored research program. The resulting Continuing Professional Education (CPE) program was launched in 1997 with little support and few restrictions from the college. The CPE program grew between 1997 and 1999 by focusing on mandated noncredit education programs for local professionals. The next decade brought both challenge and growth to the combined CPE/SR program.

CHALLENGES OF CHANGE

Perhaps the greatest challenge presented during leadership change is the need to calibrate the goals and objectives of one's program to support the values of the new administration. This is particularly challenging in a small institution where the new leader's perceptions and beliefs affect each individual horizontally through one's peers and vertically throughout the ranks of the institution. Tables 1 and 2 list the STIM leaders who served between 1999 and 2009 along with their opinions about the various CPE/SR programs and activities. Following is a brief overview of the impact of these leaders on the CPE/SR unit.

<i>Year</i>	<i>President</i>	<i>Enterprise services</i>	<i>Lifelong learning</i>	<i>Sponsored research</i>	<i>Revenue generation</i>
1999	Creaser	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral
2000	Creaser	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral
2001	Smith	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes
2002	Smith	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes
2003	Smith	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes
2004	Smith	No	Neutral	Yes	Yes
2005	Salmon	No	Neutral	No	Yes
2006	Salmon	No	Neutral	No	Yes
2007	Salmon	No	Neutral	No	Yes
2008	Salmon	No	Neutral	No	Yes
2009	Newman	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1. Presidents' opinion of CPE/SR programs and activities

<i>Year</i>	<i>President</i>	<i>Enterprise services</i>	<i>Lifelong learning</i>	<i>Sponsored research</i>	<i>Revenue generation</i>
1999	Venter	Neutral	Neutral	Yes	Neutral
2000	Venter	Neutral	Neutral	Yes	Neutral
2001	Simon	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Yes
2002	Simon	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Yes
2003	Andes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2004	Kramer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2005	Merry	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Yes
2006	Merry	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Yes
2007	Merry	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Yes
2008	Merry	Neutral	Neutral	Neutral	Yes
2009	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD	Yes

Table 2. Provosts' opinion of CPE/SR programs and activities

CPE/SR was launched during the administration of 20-year president David Creaser. Creaser supported positive community involvement and lifelong learning activities more aggressively than research and scholarship. Dr. Sheila Ventner, Provost from 1993 to 2000, supported faculty research and was neutral about CPE programs. During the Creaser/Ventner years

CPE/SR enjoyed modest financial success and growth, partly because of its autonomy and low profile on campus. Creaser and Ventner retired in 2000.

STIM chose Myron Smith to provide the vision and energy required to guide the college through program, enrollment, and physical growth. President Smith arrived from an institution in Arizona with fresh ideas and a great deal of energy. He firmly believed that continuing education—which he defined as skills training—did not fit the mission of an institute of technology. The president freely shared this view with the local community throughout his three-year term. The first year of his administration marked the first retirement of the corporate training program and noncredit public program offerings. President Smith was, however, a strong advocate for research, and expanded the college's scholarship portfolio during his term. CPE/SR changed its name to SR/CPE and focused the majority of its attention on developing and supporting research projects.

Reginald Simon, a 25-year veteran distinguished professor, replaced Ventner as provost. Simon focused on maintaining stability during the presidential transition and successfully initiated an institutional mission change that allowed the college to grow. Though neutral about CPE/SR programs, Simon generally supported the office and allowed it to operate without interference.

During the Smith administration, Ron Simon resigned and was replaced by interim provost Roger Andes, a 20-year administrator from another state college. Andes actively supported the expansion of the original continuing education program, and under his leadership the CE program gained oversight of its first credit-bearing project, STIM special sessions. During Andes's administration, President Smith concentrated on the academic programs and did not object to Andes' expansion of the SR/CPE office.

In 2002, interim provost Andes was replaced by Thomas Kramer, who continued to support the SR/CPE programs. Kramer expanded the CE program to include oversight of the Small Business Development Center and allowed it to revive its corporate training program with a focus on research-related endeavors. Kramer and Smith differed on a number of critical issues, which led to Kramer's replacement by 25-year faculty member, Rose Merry. When Smith left STIM in 2004, the institution faced serious enrollment and financial threats caused in part by his ambitious desire to change the institution more quickly than it was prepared to support.

In 2004, Paul Salmon, a retired community-college president, replaced

Smith as the interim president for a period of four years. He considered research a luxury the college could not afford and reduced the research profile of the campus. SR/CPE changed its name back to CPE/SR. Salmon focused on fiscal responsibility and began his quest to reduce campus expenses. Though discussions about reducing the size of CPE/SR—an office he considered non-essential—were held several times during his term, the only significant change was to have conference planning report to the vice president of administration.

Perhaps owing to his community-college background, Smith attempted unsuccessfully to merge STIM with the local community college and directed CPE/SR to leave corporate training to the community college. Once again CPE/SR retired its corporate training program, though it retained responsibility for the Small Business Development Center.

Provost Merry worked to maintain stability on campus during its search for a permanent president. She supported CPE/SR, though it was not a high priority for her administration. During the Salmon/Merry years, the continuing education programs maintained financial independence from the college and built a fund reserve equal to its annual payroll. Financial independence from the college protected CPE/SR during the financially troubled Salmon years as there were no savings to be had from a unit where only two of the 14 staff members held college-funded positions.

In July 2008, Roger Newman became STIM's sixth president. President Newman displays a keen interest in research, scholarship, community engagement, and quality instruction. All CPE/SR components promise to flourish under his administration. A tenth administrative change—a new provost—will take place effective July 2009.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

Frequent and dramatic leadership changes threatened CPE/SR programs, and the different name and programs confused its primary market, the local community. In spite of this, the program and staff grew during the years of change. It can be said that each of the STIM executives attempted to improve the institution, though their views sometimes contradicted existing institutional values and objectives. Over time, each leader's viewpoint blended into the existing campus culture, resulting in a more comfortable pattern of behavior and decision making. The most vulnerable period for CPE/SR was when the new leaders expected the campus programs and departments to conform to their vision of the institution.

Leadership changes required CPE/SR to demonstrate its value to the

institution in the context of each new administrator's personal vision. Attempts to recalibrate to nine administration changes led CPE/SR to organize its offerings as a portfolio of programs and services. During the various administrations, institutional values changed from financial efficiency to constituency (community, alumni, political) support to aggressive growth and scholarship and then back again to financial efficiency.

The constant was that each president viewed the CE unit as an investment expected to return resources to the institution. The key to survival was to identify institutional values and subsequently express CPE/SR in terms of the current leader's perception of return on investment. By developing a portfolio of services with stated impacts, CPE/SR was able to position itself to satisfy each president's vision and prepare for the next change in administration.

DEVELOPING A PORTFOLIO

Developing the CPE/SR portfolio required an honest assessment of the office's core competencies and greatest value to the institution. Its self-perception was of an organization that assessed, developed and offered customized training for working professionals. This view limited opportunities for the unit and did not convey its true scope and value to the institution. A deeper assessment identified underlying abilities and allowed for creative growth and development. Upon closer examination, CPE/SR offered the following competencies:

- workforce and research project development and administration;
- seasoned effective project management;
- marketing research (environmental scanning for emerging workforce needs);
- ability to develop and offer customized training for workforce development;
- ability to write and teach others to write grants and business plans;
- strong relationships with strategic markets and constituencies:
 - o local industry for research and internship opportunities;
 - o K-12 administrators, teachers and students;
 - o local economic development community & NYS government officials;
 - o local entrepreneurs; and
 - o employed and retired executives, doctors, lawyers, etc.;
- ability to synthesize collection of skills/interests to form marketable

projects;

- capacity to collect and maintain funds in non-state accounts; and
- experienced contract administration expertise and infrastructure.

It became clear that CPE/SR had developed the capacity to create, fund, and manage financially self-sustaining lifelong learning, economic development, and research projects of strategic value to the institution. This vision was not articulated in previous reports and marketing materials. The new vision allowed CPE/SR to describe its value in the context of changing leadership priorities.

<i>Enterprise services: strategic relationships, student internships, revenue</i>
SBDC (grant-funded)
Corporate training (contracts only)
Corporate research collaboration
<i>Lifelong learning services: strategic relationships, instant alumni, revenue</i>
Institute for Learning in Retirement (contracts)
Leadership Mowhawk Valley (contracts)
Digital Towpath (contracts and grants)
K-12 programs (grants, revenue)
<i>Sponsored research activities: college service, revenue generation</i>
Grants development (service to college)
Grants administration (service to college, revenue)
<i>Revenue generation: college service, revenue</i>
Summer and winter sessions (administration contributed by CPE/SR)
Government relations and economic development
Conferencing (maintain coordination and relationship, though not currently reporting to CPE/SR)

Table 3. CPE/SR portfolio of services

The CPE/SR portfolio includes four types of service, each with its own funding model and value to the institution. Grants and contracts support the enterprise, lifelong learning, and sponsored research functions but do not generate significant net return to the college. They are self-sufficient

service functions whose perceived value to the institutional leaders was volatile during times of frequent change. By accepting new responsibilities without compensation for institutional revenue generation, CPE/SR strengthened its position within the college.

Prior to 2001, institutional revenue generation functions such as conferencing, special sessions administration, and government relations were handled on an ad hoc basis. CPE/SR assumed responsibility for these functions from provosts Andes and Kramer, who recognized the CE organization's interest and capacity to support revenue-generating operations. Ultimately, the growth of this part of the CPE/SR portfolio allowed the original service areas to weather administration changes.

Lifelong learning programs survived the transitions because the college did not fund them, yet they developed and maintained relationships that were valuable to the development efforts of the college. Armed with a new understanding of its capabilities, CPE/SR grew by contracting its services to administer lifelong learning and professional development programs and offering "instant alumni" to support STIM's fledgling development efforts. Though the director would have been personally more satisfied to offer CPE programs directly to retired and working adults, the stable and loyal constituency that comes from established independent programs more than compensated for the loss of identity. Ultimately CPE/SR was able to enhance and expand the college's reputation by administering programs for STIM's strategically valuable partners.

Enterprise services emerged through turbulent times more or less intact. The Small Business Development Center developed direct ties to the STIM business and technology faculty by including them in local entrepreneurial projects. The staff volunteered their time at all institution-wide enrollment-management functions to improve its visibility on campus. The corporate training program retained long-term training contracts with several organizations but gave up outreach to local corporations, a function that may be restored through collaboration with Career Services. Research collaboration is supported to the extent possible with existing staff. The corporate service functions may expand once again under the new president and provost.

The CPE/SR journey began with responsibility for sponsored research, a functional area of the college that experienced a wide variance of support and expectations. It is debatable whether grants should be considered revenue generation, but irrefutable that they support the scholarship capacity of the institution. CPE/SR capitalized on its capacity to administer grants

and contracts by proposing to the Air Force Research Laboratory (AFRL) in Rome, NY, that STIM administer the laboratory's visiting faculty research program. Now in its fifth year, the contract provides indirect cost revenue that offsets the cost of operating the sponsored-research function. This is another instance where CPE/SR supports the college's mission without direct cost to the institution.

LESSONS LEARNED

Since effective CE programs operate within the context of the institution, leadership changes demand that each support function be reassessed to determine its relevance and value to the changing priorities of the institution. By maintaining an objective view of new leadership and adopting a flexible framework of possible roles for a CE unit, preparing for change leads to resilience. Just as a diverse portfolio offers stability during turbulent financial times, diversifying CE programming provides stability during turbulent times. The following are some of the lessons learned through nine administration changes in 10 years.

Lesson One: Describe the CE organization as a portfolio of products and services.

CPE/SR uses four main categories: lifelong learning (offering strategic relationships in the community, instant alumni); enterprise services (offering positive corporate relations and opportunities for faculty to participate in research, internships and new programs); sponsored research (offering revenue, grant development support, government relations assistance and scholarship opportunities); and revenue generation (raising revenue by supporting key institutional functions). By organizing products and services as a portfolio of activities related by function and relevance to the college, the return on investment becomes more obvious to the stakeholders. Enterprise services were sustained when President Smith eliminated corporate training by shifting emphasis to corporate research collaboration. When necessary, the ROI can be segmented by category, allowing the remaining parts of the portfolio to stand alone. After President Salmon eliminated most enterprise services activities, the lifelong learning, sponsored research, and revenue generation categories continued functioning without interruption. The parts of the portfolio are viewed as separate entities, each with its own ROI to the institution.

Lesson Two: Build a team with core skills and knowledge.

Times of change can be disorienting for some staff members. CPE/SR replaced several key staff members who could not adapt to the ambiguities and uncertainties of change. Today the CE unit is much more resilient because of staff members who look for opportunities to grow through change, possess excellent program-management skills, and have a gift for creative self-expression. These individuals are equally comfortable scouting, instructing, managing, writing, or coordinating events. And the real bonus is that they enjoy working with one another.

Lesson Three: Be prepared for financial self-sufficiency at all times.

The ability to cover one's payroll may be a matter of survival during times of change. CPE/SR is fortunate to have multiple funding and financial tracking options so its funds are as diversified as its programs. And it is always prepared to support staff salaries during periods of insufficient funding. By contracting out its administrative services, the unit is able to raise sufficient funds to keep it reasonably stable.

Lesson Four: Shift emphases to match (changing) institutional priorities.

Most CE units try to align with institutional priorities and remain connected to the organization's mission. When the institutional priorities change, it is possible to stay in sync with changes by emphasizing appropriate aspects of the CE portfolio while de-emphasizing others. The CPE/SR corporate training program experienced times of great success and others when it was not in the spotlight. This was not ideal, but it allowed the CE unit to survive change with continued support from the various administrators. Focus resources on issues of greatest value to administration. It may be possible to tweak existing programs to contribute more directly to the priorities of the new administration. When student internships are the new priority, use the corporate training network to assist the new administration. When revenue is most important, use the core skills of the CE unit to assist with development fund raising efforts, grant writing, research collaborations and other forms of networking the college may not have developed in the past. This is not to suggest the CE unit abandon its core mission, but rather to think creatively about ways in which the unit may be uniquely positioned to support the new administration.

Lesson Five: Track and adopt best practices.

Personal engagement with successful colleagues is critical during times of change. It is essential to reconsider program options that did not seem to fit the institutional profile in the past. Programs that work well for one's colleagues should be considered as possible solutions to problems of change. The University Continuing Education Association (UCEA) offers many excellent opportunities for networking and learning and can be a strong advocate for its members facing the challenges of change.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON BECOMING RESILIENT

Resilience is not easily achieved; it is a product of self-knowledge, openness to new ideas, and understanding of core values. Frequent changes in university leadership are as stressful as they are inevitable, and anyone responsible for a program must be resilient enough to adapt, but in positive ways. The flexibility afforded most continuing education units gives them an advantage over other parts of the campus. Beginning with a clear understanding of the institution's priorities, CE leadership must look for ways to support the new administration while maintaining the essential elements of the CE program. Successful realignment of CE functions depends on an objective assessment of existing resources, including the program portfolio and staff capabilities. If new ventures are necessary, look to organizations and counterparts for support and creative solutions.

More than most, continuing education leaders are accustomed to change, whether it comes from changes in institutional leadership or to priorities. While the turnover in administration described in the case study is exceptional, the need to adapt is constant in continuing education, and it is important for leadership to work at being resilient. 🌱