A Qualitative Study of Organizational Culture and Leadership Approaches in Higher Education

Catherine Choe
University of California, Los Angeles
Graduate School of Education and Information Studies
Higher Education and Organizational Change

- Introduction
    - Based on the lack of extant literature, high turnover and burnout rates, and low morale affecting many higher education professionals, more research is required to adequately illustrate and prioritize the experiences of individuals working in a leadership capacity within postsecondary education (Astin & Leland, 1991). This study aims to shed light on a narrow yet significant corner of the literature that remains largely untouched: unveiling how the organizational culture of a single program and larger institution impacts professionals' leadership approaches, and how certain staff members are able to acquire and maintain resiliency through their work.
    - The purpose of the study is to examine how the organizational culture of a single postsecondary institution and program affects the ways in which full-time staff members contextualize their role as a leader to students. This study also investigates how higher education leaders respond to certain bureaucratic obstacles in their paths to enacting change at an institutional level. Thus, the research questions below address categories that initially emerged upon conceptualizing this purpose, and they include leadership styles, the process of enacting change, and bureaucratic obstacles.
        - Which leadership styles and/or approaches do higher education professionals draw from when working with and/or supervising undergraduate students?
        - How have higher education leaders tried to enact change within their respective programs and institutions, and what was the end result of these efforts?
        - How have professionals' experiences been in attempting to navigate bureaucratic pressures and obstacles in higher education?
- Methods
    - This is a qualitative study consisting of: 1) 30-45 minute interviews with 4 full-time professional staff members working in a director or coordinator position within a higher education program, 2) participant observations at 2 60-95 minute meetings, and 3) analysis of documents distributed at the two observed meetings, which include meeting agendas, applications, and newspaper articles describing specific campus-wide initiatives and comparable programs at other postsecondary institutions. Snowball sampling emerged throughout the study's recruitment strategies, as participants voluntarily referred other on-campus leaders whom they perceived to be closely aligned with the study's research goals (Creswell, 2007). Finally, grounded theory was incorporated throughout the data analysis stage in order to make meaning of the available data (Creswell, 2007).
- Results

- o The study findings highlight the role of organizational culture in shaping the individualized leadership approaches of higher education staff members. More specifically, the data suggests that the extent to which harmony and balance exist within a program's big and small culture, in addition to the alignment between the macro-level, institution-wide culture and the micro-level, program-wide culture, affects the ways in which higher education leaders choose to actualize certain ideal leadership traits within their daily practice and work. While leadership philosophies may evolve over time and not align directly with the ways in which these professionals initially envisioned their roles, many of them gradually tailored their leadership approaches to adapt to and survive within the constraints of their program's organizational culture. Finally, bureaucratic barriers oftentimes manifested themselves in the form of siloing and lack of communication between organizational units within the postsecondary institution the study participants work at. Thus, these bureaucratic roadblocks to the process of enacting change eventually impacted the organizational culture of each program.
- Conclusion
  - o Implications of this study include the creation of informal and/or formal gatherings that encourage leaders at varying levels of experience and working within different programs across campus to share resources, touch base with each other about important developments and concerns within their respective programs and, perhaps most importantly, network and serve as a professional support system and network for one another. These gatherings can aim to alleviate some of the sentiments echoed by the participants regarding the siloing of program departments and organizational units. Additionally, the creation of higher education leadership development institutes can allow for leadership skills and knowledge to be freely and fluidly shared across higher education institutions and unbound by geographical regions. Future directions for research include investigating the role and significance of power dynamics and oppression in affecting the organizational culture of a higher education institution and program. Finally, future research can adopt a quantitative approach in order to survey a wider range of postsecondary institutions, ranging from community colleges to public and private 4-year institutions, as well as institutions across the nation.
- References
  - o Astin, H., and C. Leland. (1991). *Women of influence, women of vision*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
  - o Creswell, J. (2007). *The five traditions of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Acknowledgments
  - o Mom and Dad, Dr. Patricia McDonough, Dr. Kathryn Anderson-Levitt, Dr. Sarah Jean Johnson, 222A-C classmates, UCLA Higher Education & Organizational Change faculty and classmates, USC Educational Counseling faculty and alumni, and El Camino College colleagues.
- Contact Information
  - o catchoe@g.ucla.edu