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Designing and Implementing a Learning Organization-Oriented Information Technology Planning and Management Process

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education is changing. Driven by the need to increase productivity, quality, and access while meeting the challenges of competition, universities, especially state-assisted institutions, are seeking ways to do more with less governmental support. Information Technology (IT) is perhaps the enabling tool that will bring transformative change (Oblinger & Rush, 1997). The organizations that have had primary managerial responsibility for IT implementation on many campuses need to change and be restructured if the technology is to live up to its potential.

This case study provides an overview of the process utilized in implementing a broad-based strategy to address the information technology needs of a large public university, the University of Memphis. It deals at length with the planning and creation of an IT governance structure and a strategic planning and management model. In this case, modern theories of organizational change and strategic planning were applied to the creation and improvement of the University's IT structure.

CASE QUESTIONS

- What IT changes are needed to significantly improve a large state-assisted urban campus?
- What organizational structures are necessary to enable meaningful IT decision making?
- What types of "people" changes need to occur and in what time frame?
- What are the major barriers in making planned IT change happen?

CASE NARRATIVE

Background

The University of Memphis (UoM) is the flagship institution of four-year universities within the Tennessee Board of Regents system of higher education. The campus of

2 Penrod & Harbor

approximately 20,000 students, with its primary location in the geographic center of the city, is ethnically, socially, and economically diverse. This regional, urban, doctoral granting institution is within a relatively short commute of 1.5 million residents of the mid-South. The institution has two campuses and a growing number of other locations offering courses. It consists of nine schools and colleges and five centers of excellence. The University employs about 2,400 faculty and staff members. An annual state and non-state budget of approximately \$220 million meets educational and service needs.

The University of Memphis is a state-assisted institution governed by a state-regulated system office. As an urban university, it strives to provide a stimulating academic environment consisting of innovative undergraduate education and excellence in selected research areas and graduate programs. Exposure to diversity in the composition of the student body, faculty, staff, and administrators enhances educational experiences. The University responds to the challenging responsibility of being located in a culturally diverse region by developing a unique blend of teaching, research, and service that contributes to the general welfare and growth of the region.

Historical Context

Shortly after assuming the leadership of The University of Memphis in 1991, President V. Lane Rawlins recognized that the existing IT unit could not provide the vision and ongoing assistance needed to support the institution as it began a significant change process. Initially, he instituted self-studies and brought in an outside consultant to define the magnitude of needed change. This led to a decision to create a chief information officer (CIO) position and to combine various IT-related units into one.

Thus in the Fall of 1995, the President established a new division of Information Systems (IS) and created the position of Vice President for Information Systems & CIO (VP/CIO). The new unit had responsibility for networking, academic and administrative computing, and telecommunications. As chief information officer, the new Vice President also had responsibility for developing an IT strategic planning process, an associated governance structure, and a much-needed information policy for the institution.

The new IS organization was formed from units that had previously reported to either the Vice President for Business & Finance or the Provost, who each had IT staff with mid-manager or below levels of authority. The need to restructure and redirect the organization was evident. Experienced senior-level administrators were required, and several existing positions within the organization needed to be redefined. The need for different management principles, a renewed service orientation, team-based activities, and a planning focus would lead to a commitment to begin an organizational cultural change toward that of a learning organization.

A learning organization is one that continually expands its capacity to create its future. For such an organization, “adaptive learning” must be joined by “generative learning”—learning that enhances the capacity to create. Characteristics include shared visions, personal mastery, systems thinking, and team learning. Such organizations can also be defined as:

[...] organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together (Senge, 1990, p. 3).

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