Running head: UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI

University of Central Missouri: Organizational Culture

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The University of Central Missouri (UCM) located in Warrensburg, Missouri, possesses a culture very different from any university that I have been a part of, but a culture that seems very efficient and effective. This analysis will discuss the culture of UCM using thoughts from Edgar Schein's (2004) *Organizational Culture and Leadership.* Various leaders and their impact on the organizational culture will be discussed as well as common assumptions that are relevant at UCM. Although my experience consisted of work in two offices—the Office of Admissions and the Office of Campus Activities—for the purpose of this paper, I will concentrate mainly on the Office of Admissions, where I spent most of my time during my internship.

Description of the UCM Office of Admissions [Appendix A]

For the largest part of my internship, I worked in the Office of Admissions. This office was located in the Ward Edwards building, one of the first, and grandest buildings seen on campus. Upon entering the building, you would enter an atrium containing flags representing all of the countries students at UCM come from. Under these flags are four large glass doors that enter into the Office of Admissions. Once you enter the doors, there is a large desk where two office professionals work. To the left of the desk is a hallway that leads to the cubicles belonging to the Admissions Representatives, and to the right is a hallway that leads to the cubicles belonging to the processors, technology employees, and other employees focusing mainly on maintenance of the admissions department. A wall separates these two areas. Also on the right, is the office of Ann Nordyke, the Director for Admissions.

Only cubicles separate most of the Office of Admissions, with very few offices closed in by walls. Those that do have offices hold higher positions on the organizational chart. This is very conducive to regular conversation amongst employees, creativity flourishes, and for the

most part, employees develop friendly relationships. On the other hand, having only cubicles can be very distracting for some employees and may not foster a high level of productivity. Generally, when one worker gets distracted from work, he/she begins talking to others and distracting them from work as well. I believe there are pros and cons to having cubicles in the office, however, I also feel that more productivity could be achieved if employees had their own offices enclosed by walls. I believe the general culture of UCM encourages conversation amongst employees, and that much conversation would still take place if this happened.

Another aspect of the physical admissions office that I think could be altered is the separation of the two operations of the office. Because there is a wall between the two main operations of the office—recruiting and management—there is a lack of cohesiveness in the Office of Admissions. Work amongst these two groups would be more effective if they had a collaborative working relationship, however, because of the dividing wall, very little interaction occurs between the groups.

Description of the Methods Used in Fieldwork

In order to accumulate a plethora of information about the organizational culture at UCM, particularly the Office of Admissions, I interviewed a number of individuals, attended meetings and programs, and talked with students who attend UCM.

The individuals I interviewed included those that work in the Office of Admissions, and those that work with the Office of Admissions. I did not inform them that I was gathering information about the organizational culture for fear of tainting my results, rather, I scheduled meetings to learn more about various aspects of UCM. I interviewed Brooke Villigram--my supervisor, and Assistant Director for New Student Experiences; Kate Rorvig--an Admissions Representative; Dr. Matt Melvin—Assistant Provost for Enrollment Management; Emily

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI

Bergsieker—Assistant Director of Campus Activities for Student Engagement; and Kristie

Brinkley—Coordinator for Volunteer Services and Non-Traditional Student Programs. Each of

these interviews provided me a different lens to view the organizational culture of the admissions

office and UCM.

As part of my internship, I helped coordinate the Orientation sessions. My work in

planning these sessions as well as attending them provided me a scope of reference for the

culture of UCM and the values and assumptions that are communicated to new students and their

families. Also, as a portion of my internship, I worked closely with the Orientation and Week of

Welcome Leaders (OWWLs), who I was able to gain insight from about UCM and the Office of

Admissions.

Finally, my supervisors allowed me to attend various meetings that provided the most

concrete evidence of deeply rooted cultural assumptions and values enacted at UCM. These

meetings included Week of Welcome meetings, an all-enrollment meeting, Opening of School

meeting, and academic advising meeting.

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Critical Analysis of the Culture

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Artifacts

According to Schein (2004), artifacts include "all the phenomena that one sees, hears, and

feels when one encounters a new group with an unfamiliar culture" (p.25). When I arrived at

UCM, I first noticed the appearance of the campus. UCM is a university with grandiose,

intricately-designed buildings, gorgeous landscaping, and decorative artwork. I knew initially

that this would be an institution concerned with its appearance. This theory was soon validated

as I began work in the Office of Admissions. One of the first rules I was given was that all

employees in the Office of Admissions should be dressed professionally everyday. While other

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI

offices get to enjoy casual Friday, those in admissions are to be concerned with presenting a professional vision for all new students and visitors.

As I become comfortable in my new position, I began to notice the physical set up of the Office of Admissions, as described previously. I was introduced to other employees and soon learned that the more prominent positions in Admissions received offices, while others worked in cubicles. I also began to recognize the language and work habits of those around me. The admissions representatives and Brooke seemed to have a very close working relationship and friendship. Because of this and the physical set up, I would frequently experience the representatives watching youtube videos together, having conversations about their weekends, and other activities not related to work. Initially, I questioned whether or not much work was accomplished in this office, but learned otherwise later.

Mission and Values

UCM's mission (2008) states, "The University of Central Missouri experience transforms students into lifelong learners, dedicated to service, with the knowledge, skills and confidence to succeed and lead in the region, state, nation and world". Through my various interviews and meetings, I feel that this mission is very much enacted at UCM. While many employees often get wrapped up in the monotony of task maintenance, I frequently heard individuals state that their sole focus was on student learning and development. Campus activities, such as leadership retreats, community service, and educational workshops prove UCM's dedication to their mission. Aside from this, students are able to work very closely with the city of Warrensburg and complete internships, volunteer, hold part-time jobs, and collaborate on projects and activities with the city.

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI

UCM also adopts a set of core values that it uses to guide work. These values are learning, excellence, service, responsibility, adaptability, diversity, and community. These values are particularly prominent in work in admissions. Admissions representatives display and speak about these values proudly when they meet with potential students and attend admissions fairs. It is evident that diversity is a value placed above all others in admissions because one admissions representative is hired solely for the purpose of recruiting a variety of students and creating a diverse campus population.

Assumptions

Many factors contributed to the difficulty of recognizing the assumptions that guide behavior at UCM and the Office of Admissions. First, my internship was separated between two offices, so when I finally became accustomed to practices and the culture in admissions, I was moved to campus activities. Second, until this week, UCM has had an interim president presiding over the institution until the new president took office. At times, this provided a lack of leadership and focus on campus. Lastly, my time at UCM is limited along with my recognition of the cultural assumptions.

Argyris (1976) as cited in Schein (2004) describes cultural assumptions as "'theories-in-use'—the implicit assumptions that actually guide behavior, that tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things" (p.31). Some of the deeply rooted assumptions I have recognized throughout my time at UCM are described in detail below:

#1 Education of the student comes first. In nearly every meeting I attended, education of the student was the main topic. At the Opening of School meeting, each office reported to the group their newest initiatives and updates for students. Very frequently, individuals would state "please assist the students in doing ____", or "we have developed this program to assist students

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI

in _____". This provided evidence that each department was looking out for the well-being of

the students. I also noticed the importance of education in both offices I worked in through my

own education. Each office made sure I had the opportunity to meet with various employees and

attend meetings that would enhance my experience and add to my education.

> **#2 Research should be used to guide programs.** One of the most important operating

principles for the division of student affairs is to backup any requests or programs with research.

This research can come internally or externally and needs to be presented to Dr. Matt Melvin.

Dr. Melvin stresses the importance with sharing research when proposing a new idea, but also

using research to share accomplishments and successful programs with the rest of the institution.

He also uses this research for job assessment at the end of the year to decide if individuals will

be promoted or demoted in any way. Finally, research, along with the university mission and

vision, is the primary means for budget allocation decisions. When budgets are cut or increased,

it is because of the research that has been presented and the overall mission of the institution.

> **#3 Each office should create a mission statement. Common language is not likely.**

At UCM, every office abides by the overall mission of the institution, but is also required to

create their own departmental institution. While these are aligned with the university mission,

they are all very different as each department serves a different function. Because of this, there

is very little commonality between departments and they do not work together often.

Collaboration and common language are not likely to be seen at UCM. Because of this, there is

often a breakdown of communication and a lack of mutual understanding.

> **#4 Student Services and Academic Services are separate entities.** Another common

assumption at UCM is that student services and academic services are separate and seldom work

together. While both areas focus mainly on students, they do not collaborate to create a cohesive

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI

experience for students. Each feels that they are more important to a student's experience and can do their job without the other.

#5 Work should be fun. Finally, it is widely known at UCM that work should be fun. While work comes with its stresses, many employees are friends with one another and truly enjoy their jobs. Nearly every department has regular celebrations, lunches, gatherings, and outings to enjoy with one another. This creates an environment that is laid back, enjoyable, and people like coming to work.

Recommendations to Improve and Reinforce Culture

UCM does a great job of fostering an effective, enjoyable organizational culture, but there are some improvements that can be made. For one, since there has been an interim president serving on campus this summer, there is a lack of leadership and focus at the university. I believe that once the new president takes office, there will be more cohesion and vision, but this president needs to realize that it is his job to step up and take action, or appoint individuals to do this for him.

Also, UCM has a great set of values that it operates by. However, some of these values are not overtly visible in everyday work at UCM. For instance, adaptability is uncommon as it is very difficult to change certain policies and programs. Similarly, creativity does not flourish as much as it could because proposals are somewhat difficult to pass.

Lastly, I believe that UCM could do a much better job of fostering communication and collaboration between departments and between student services and academic services. I believe that UCM leaders should encourage programs to be sponsored by multiple areas so they can improve. I also believe that communication should be streamlined so that individuals can

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI

easily discuss topics with other departments. Hosting an inter-departmental meeting every

semester might make this possible.

In order to make these changes at UCM, I would use Schein's (2004) Ten-Step Culture

Assessment Process. First, I would meet with the President and various other leaders on campus

to discuss my findings and see what they feel could be improved, enhanced, or changed to create

a more effective and efficient culture. I would then meet with various campus constituents to

find out their opinions as well. I would present my research learned from Schein (2004) and

various other campus consultants and create a framework for discussion. Instead of projecting

my own views on them, I would ask deep questions that would encourage them to think critically

about how they can improve UCM.

Some of my most prominent discoveries of the organization culture came during my first

two weeks of employment. I think it would be very important to talk to employees about their

beginnings at UCM and talk in depth with new employees who may have insight into the visible

artifacts of the culture. I would also talk to individuals about the mission and values employed

by the institution. While they are great values, I would create a list of the values and have

groups brainstorm ways in which the university carries them out, or fails to.

After discovering all of these values and artifacts, I would encourage employees to find

the meanings behind them and discover the assumptions imbedded in the culture at UCM. I

would then allow them to come up with ways to improve upon their culture and identify

obstacles and supports for doing so. I would then report this information to the President and

other leaders and encourage them to follow up with these actions and analyze them in the future

to see if the culture has improved. If the employees discover some of the same assumptions that

I have, I would encourage them to take some of the actions that I have outlined previously.

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI

Conclusion

My internship at the University of Central Missouri has been a transforming, educational experience. I believe the culture of UCM is devoted to educating students and serving the community. At the same time, the employees of UCM make sure work is enjoyable. These factors are now important to me in searching for a future job and I believe they foster an effective organizational culture. While certain improvements can be made, I think UCM does a great job of following its mission and values and creating a culture conducive to student and employee learning.

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL MISSOURI

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