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Student-Centered Learning: An Organizational Imperative

Research has shown that viewing educational institutions from the lens of high performing organizations can positively influence student-learning outcomes (Ostroff, 1992; Ostroff & Schmitt, 1993; Jenkins, 2011). More recently, researchers have begun applying an organizational lens to education institution reform (Pil & Leana, 2009; Leana & Pil, 2006). A fruitful way to ensure that student-centered learning (SCL) gets implemented in classrooms and across the curriculum is to ensure that both students and faculty members are supported. Classrooms are embedded within organizations, thus the surrounding context will influence the extent to which SCL happens consistently in a high quality fashion. Accounting for the organizational context would ensure that both faculty and students receive the proper support needed.

While SCL has been shown to result in positive student outcomes like deeper learning and higher engagement levels, it may require more than faculty commitment. A commitment from organizational leaders is also needed to make student-centered learning (SCL) the focal point of the organization's vision and strategy. Once SCL becomes part of the organization's vision and strategy, senior leaders must be committed to driving the necessary behavioral changes throughout the organization. Using an organizational performance model for educational institutions (e.g., Baldrige Performance Excellence criteria), this article will highlight how taking a whole-organization perspective can support SCL.

Student-Centered Learning Defined

Student-centered learning (SCL) is a reconceptualization of teaching and learning, specifically looking at the role of faculty and students (Thamraksa, 2003; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Characteristics of SCL include greater student *choice* in what to study; increased student *responsibility* and *accountability* for learning; student as *active, rather than passive* learners; and a shifting of the faculty's role from *expert-to-facilitator* of learning (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Thamraksa (2003) describes SCL as students making the shift from *dependent to self-directed learners*.

Educational Criteria for Performance Excellence (EdPEX)

While there are many models that could be used to highlight the importance of organizational context for student-centered learning, using a performance model

that is designed specifically for education institutions is important. One such model is the Baldrige Educational Criteria for Performance Excellence (known as EdPEX in Thailand).

The EdPEX model empowers organizations, across all sizes and programs, to improve student learning by aligning plans, processes, decisions, people, action and results (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2013). The rest of the article will illustrate how the EdPEX model could help leaders think about reinforcing student-centered learning from a whole-organization perspective.

EdPEX & Organizational Factors

The EdPEX model explicitly focuses on student-learning outcomes by getting the organization to be clear about the results it wants to achieve. Within the model, *Results* are the most important of all organizational processes (note: contributing processes include: Leadership; Strategy; Customers; Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management; Workforce; and Operations). Organizational Results are explicitly divided into sub-dimensions including student learning, customer-focus, workforce-focus, leadership and finance results. For the purpose of this article, student-learning results will be highlighted. Included for further discussion are selected processes and culture.

By way of illustration, the student-centered results for an Entrepreneurship Education program may be defined as:

“By the time students graduate from our program, they will be able to start and build businesses. They will be able to combine various elements required for starting businesses (i.e., people, process and products) into a new enterprise structure that generates value. They will be able to create and pitch business plans, where they will communicate their concept to prospective stakeholders and gather information to make forecasts about growth prospects.” This way of framing student-learning outcomes blends both Bloom’s Taxonomy, specifically “creating” (Bloom, 1956) and Howard Gardner’s conception of multiple intelligence (Gardner, 2011) (Cornish & Jordan, 2012). Consistent with principles of student-centered learning it explicitly states what students will be able to *do* to achieve learning (O’Neill & McMahon, 2005). Once student-learning outcome results are defined, the EdPEX model is open for leaders to examine organizational factors that will positively influence those results.

Organizational Profile: Vision & National Culture

Before taking an organizational perspective, it is useful to understand the organization’s environment. The starting point for an EdPEX-based analysis is the organizational profile where issues of national culture can be acknowledged. For many educators, taking a student-centered learning (SCL) approach requires a paradigm shift in thinking. Thai faculty members, many of whom are accustomed to

being and behaving like the expert, are asked to give up their authority to be *facilitators, rather than directors* of student learning (Thamraksa, 2003). Thai students, many of whom are products of the Thai education system, must re-conceive their role from *passive-to-active learner* (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Cultural programming has ingrained concepts like seniority and authority into the Thai psyche to influence faculty behaviors' as well as how students think about learning and interactions within the classroom.

Thus education organizations, specifically those in Thailand, need to recognize that national cultural assumptions may often be at odds with the philosophy that underpins a student-centered approach. Given the formidable barrier that culture poses, it is crucial for organizations to ensure that SCL represents an organization-wide north star to which all activities are designed to reach. For nearly 30 years, private sector organizations have realized the impact of having a vision and mission statement on overall organizational performance (Pearce II & David, 1987). Therefore ensuring that SCL is part of an organization's vision will serve to align internal organizational processes, which will be examined next.

Leadership

Research highlights the important role of faculty leaders in influencing student learning outcomes (Bruggencate, Luyten, Scheerens & Slegers, 2012). Effective organizations start at the top, so successful implementation of student-centered learning (SCL) across the curriculum should be part of the broader vision and senior leaders must drive that vision throughout the rest of the organization. Building on the Entrepreneurship Education program example, important considerations outlined by the EdPEX criteria may include questions like:

"How do senior leaders set your organization's vision around student-centered entrepreneurship education? How do senior leaders deploy the vision and values? How do leaders ensure that workforce, key suppliers and partners are contributing to this vision?" (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2013).

Thus, when student-centered learning (SCL) outcomes becomes part of how the organization measures its *own* performance, senior leaders will be focused on ensuring that the entire workforce (i.e., faculty and administrative staff), external suppliers and partner relationships are aligned to help achieve important student learning outcomes. Hence, there will be much more support to ensure that SCL is not just fostered in the classroom, but outside the classroom as well.

For entrepreneurship programs, senior leaders may foster entrepreneurial values throughout the organization and make the *number of student-initiated ventures* the yardstick by which the organization's performance is measured. Accordingly, key suppliers and partners would be selected to the extent to which they could contribute to helping students build their own ventures.

Strategy

To ensure that student-centered learning (SCL) outcomes (i.e., number of student ventures started) are achieved, organizational leaders will need to concern themselves with how those outcomes are represented in strategic considerations and long-term goals, for example:

“By the year 2025, our program will be known as the premier center for Entrepreneurship Education in Thailand and graduates of our program will have started X number of ventures.”

By elevating SCL to the level of organizational strategy the following questions become relevant:

“How do you collect and analyze relevant data considering your strategic challenges/advantages around student-centered entrepreneurship education? How do you collect and analyze data relevant to your ability to execute the strategic plan?” (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2013).

If SCL around entrepreneurship is a strategic consideration, the organization will need to take steps in collecting and analyzing relevant data to measure progress on long-term goals relevant to student-centered learning and venture founding. The program may ensure that the curriculum successively moves students closer to starting their own ventures by their final year in the program. Perhaps the program hosts a number of SCL community-of-practice sessions to get all faculty members trained in the techniques and methodologies. The program might examine the number of courses throughout the curriculum that have explicitly employed SCL course design. Finally, senior leaders might track the number of student ventures established after graduation. Other SCL metrics might include the number of presentations from experienced entrepreneurs about their venture launching process, the number of entrepreneurship conferences, consortium and meetings the faculty initiates related to SCL techniques for producing entrepreneurs.

Customer-Focused Organizational Culture

One of the unique aspects of the EdPEX model (as an alternative to the more established QA – Quality Assurance – system in Thailand) is its *non-prescriptive* and *adaptable* approach to how educational organizations achieve their *own* goals (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2013). The value of this approach is that its underlying philosophy is more consistent with the philosophy of SCL than the QA system where external evaluators *prescribe*, from the vantage point of *expertise* and *authority*, what school leaders and organizations *should* do. This is extremely important for schools that wish to cultivate an organizational culture that supports SCL practices within and beyond the classrooms.

Another unique aspect of the EdPEX model is how it encourages educational institutes to listen to the voice of the student, to be concerned with student satisfaction and engagement. This shift towards taking a “customer-focus” attitude has parallels with a SCL approach and allows the organization to begin making the cultural adjustments. Key questions include:

“How do you seek immediate and actionable feedback from students on the quality of educational programs and service? How do you determine student satisfaction and engagement?” (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2013).

These questions are directly relevant to school environments that attempt to give students an element of choice in their learning. A SCL approach, by design, will be one that focuses on truly listening to the voice of the student.

Operations-Focused Processes

To ensure that student-centered learning (SCL) happens within classrooms across multiple courses, an organization must be concerned with work processes including how courses are designed and the day-to-day operations to ensure the quality of outcomes and performance of educational programs and services (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2013). Organizational processes ensure that SCL is not left to the whim of individual faculty member’s capacity and motivation, but rather systematically applied across the curriculum. Important questions in this area include:

“How can the organization design, manage and improve its approach to SCL? What are your organization’s key work processes that support effective SCL? What key performance measures or indicators do you use to control and improve work processes related to SCL?” (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2013).

In the context of entrepreneurship education, this may mean course design and operational plans to include more field-based learning and coordinating student mentorship relationships with practicing entrepreneurs working in the field.

Workforce-Focused Processes

To support student-centered learning (SCL), the organization must be concerned with how to build an effective and supportive work environment for all faculty members. This includes assessing faculty members on their capability and capacity for SCL. A faculty member who had previously taught three lecture-heavy courses per semester may not have the capacity to change to student-centered learning for all classes at once. Perhaps a gradual process is needed.

For new faculty members, the organization needs to figure out the skills, competencies, certification and educational background needed for effective SCL course design and implementation (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program,

2013). Currently, the predominant practice is to hire faculty based on characteristics that may not lend themselves to SCL (i.e. level of post-graduate degree attainment, number of publications, research outputs, etc.) While these factors may add to the short-term reputation of the school and meet the requirements by national authorities, it may be detrimental to a vision of SCL if the appropriate skills and competencies are not screened for during faculty hires.

Measurement, Analysis and Knowledge Management

The shift toward student-centered learning (SCL) will undoubtedly generate a remarkable amount of data, information and insights. For SCL to be properly measured and tracked for performance improvement, the organization must ask itself:

“How do you select, collect, align and integrate data and information to use in tracking organizational performance around student-centered learning? How is progress on achieving strategic objectives and action plans regarding student-centered learning measured?” (Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, 2013)

With the example of an entrepreneurship education program, if the long-term goal is to have students start their own ventures by the time they graduate, what kinds of data would be useful to measure progress along the way? Perhaps, the number of business plans competitions students participate during their tenure or the number of summer internships with startup companies to give students field-based exposure or key experiences captured from self-reflective activities/knowledge management sessions for wider sharing. These measurements will ensure the organization maintains steady progress toward longer-term goals.

Conclusion

This article highlights the importance of taking a whole-organization perspective toward student-centered learning (SCL) to ensure that SCL happens within and across classrooms in the curriculum. Taking an organizational perspective provides reinforcement and support beyond the classroom. Furthermore, the Baldrige Performance Excellence Criteria (2013; EdPEX) framework is used to highlight various organizational contextual factors that will positively influence student-centered learning outcomes. Finally, the case of an Entrepreneurship Education program is used to provide a concrete example of what this perspective would look like in practice.

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