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## **COLLEGIALITY AND CULTURE: GENERAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM REFORM AT WESTERN PROTESTANT UNIVERSITY**

**Greg Dubrow**

The value of being agreeable is so important. But the weird thing is everyone learns the lesson if you stay here a while, but you may learn it the hard way. Nobody will tell you directly because there is such an anti-confrontational, anti-direct sensibility here, people learn lessons really hard, usually by finding out that a lot of talk has been going on about them and nobody's telling them anything forthrightly.

—Professor, Western Protestant University

The history of curricular reform in America is a dark and bloody ground. One almost never comes out of that discussion with the kind of incisiveness that one goes into it with.

—Senior academic administrator, Selective Private  
Research University

The review and reform of a college's general education curriculum is a process that brings together a diverse group of participants from across the institution. Whereas the structure and content of the biology curriculum is a concern mostly limited to biology professors, the design and delivery of a general education curriculum unites biologists with institutional colleagues from various disciplines and fields including economics and philosophy, along with various and sundry academic administrators. The process then becomes rife with differing interests and biases, concerns often attributed to academic discipline, mode of scholarly inquiry, or function within the organization (Gaff & Wilson, 1971; Ruscio, 1987; Toma, 1997).

Thus, as the epigraphs suggest, the process gets muddled by things lurking beneath the surface. Perspective might be shaped by a host of other factors, including interpersonal history or the institutional values and norms through which individual behavior is mediated. The process of general education reform thus becomes an issue of institutional culture. The culture of the institution dictates how effectively those who hold these various perspectives will be able to work together to solve an institutional problem (Kuh & Whitt, 1988).

This article examines the process of general education curriculum reform at Western Protestant University (WPU), a pseudonym for a religiously affiliated liberal arts college in the western United States. The theoretical framework for describing the process comes from two areas: institutional culture and a typology of academic change developed by Larry Cuban (1999). The salience of this article rests in its focus on process. The most well-meaning general education reform can be derailed if the people charged with carrying out that reform do not pay attention to the cultural markers around them.

The structure of this paper is as follows: first will be a discussion of the key concepts that make up the conceptual framework—institutional culture and Cuban's change typology. Next is a review of the study design, data, and analytic methods. The findings section comprises two parts: a brief analysis of Western Protestant University's institutional culture, and an account of the general education reform process. The paper concludes with a discussion section that integrates the description of WPU's institutional culture with the results of the process, and is organized according to the major themes uncovered by the research.

## **Institutional Culture**

Kuh and Whitt (1988), Cameron and Ettington (1998), Sackmann (1991), Alvesson and Berg (1992), and Schein (1992) have been especially effective in detailing the origins, definitions, and taxonomies of institutional culture (the terms *institutional culture* and *organization culture* here mean the same thing and will be used interchangeably). Though the study of organizations both as cultural

phenomena and as internal cultures accelerated during the late 1970s and early 1980s, some early organizational culture studies can be traced to the University of Chicago in the 1930s (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Meek, 1989; Sackmann, 1991; Trice & Beyer, 1993). During the last quarter of the twentieth century, organizational cultural studies in the United States were influenced by these interrelated developments: the economic turbulence that led to changes in the structure of American business and an interest in Japanese management styles (Ouchi & Wilkins 1985; Schein, 1992; Tierney, 1988); changing concepts of “success,” which included quality of life outside the workplace and the general quality of work-life (Frost et al., 1985); and a desire on the part of scholars and corporate managers to seek more comprehensive scientific and rational explanations for corporate behavior (Trice & Beyer, 1993).

Writing on organizational culture during these years was not limited to academic journals and scholarly books. A brisk trade grew in business “how-to” books trumpeting the claim that understanding, harnessing, and changing corporate culture was the key to success in difficult economic times. Organizational culture was heralded as a sort of panacea for all manner of corporate ills. It could be at once the key to revenue enhancement, an important variable in strategic planning, and a means by which to engineer the turnaround of troubled firms (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Deshpande & Parasuraman, 1986; Ouchi, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Trice & Beyer, 1993).

### *The Form and Substance of Institutional Culture*

A variety of approaches to explain the component parts of institutional culture are found in the literature. The most common approach is to separate discrete parts into any number of groupings. Kuh and Whitt (1988) divide culture into product and process. I use a variation on the product and process division, following a model developed by Toma, Dubrow, and Hartley (in press) which divides culture into two main segments, forms and substance. *Forms of culture* are defined as the tangible manifestations of the beliefs, values, and assumptions that the members of an organization share about that organization. Artifacts, images, icons, actions, rituals, ceremonies,

saga, and narrative are some examples of cultural forms (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 1992). The *substance of culture* is the actual beliefs and values shared by members of the organization, the normative glue that binds the actions of the members of an organization to a specified but perhaps unspoken set of standards.

### *Institutional Culture and Higher Education*

Clark (1970, 1971) was among the first to apply the nascent theories of organizational culture to the field of higher education studies. He used culture to explain the nature of “distinctive colleges” (1970) and focused on the importance of saga in the development of an organization’s cultural identity (1971). Clark defined *saga* as a “collective understanding of unique accomplishment in a formally established group” (1971, p. 500), and established sagas as important to higher education in that they help establish an organizational self-conception, which he argues is a major actor in institutional governance.

Tierney (1988) made a case for a cultural study framework not that far removed from studies of for-profit corporations. In developing his framework for the cultural researcher, Tierney identified six areas as central to any study of culture at a college or university: environment; mission; socialization; information; strategy; and leadership. He argued that this list, while no means definitive, should serve as a basis for the study of culture at a college or university. Kuh and Whitt’s (1988) monograph served to update the literature on organizational culture and studies of higher education organizations as cultural entities.

Faculty work, student life, and institutional type have been the primary areas of activity for institutional culture study in higher education. Ruscio (1987) writes that academic life possesses unique qualities, chief among them creativity and autonomy. A career in teaching and research draws people already attuned to the culture of higher education and the training process fills in any gaps (Austin, 1990; Blau, 1973; Gaff & Wilson, 1971; Ruscio, 1987). Though certain elements of the overall institutional culture are shared by faculty writ large, some roles, beliefs, and attitudes have been shown to vary according to discipline and mode of inquiry (Gaff & Wilson, 1971;

Ruscio, 1987). When divided along four axes of study—humanities, social science, natural science, and professional—professors exhibit significant differences in attitudes, beliefs, practice, and lifestyle (Gaff & Wilson, 1971). Faculty subgroups can also form along sub-disciplinary lines and by preferred mode of inquiry (Toma, 1997).

College student culture is both a reflection and a subset of youth culture (Humman, 1994; Moffatt, 1991). Moffatt posits that this is due to the ubiquitous presence in dormitory rooms of the same types of devices—computers, stereo systems, refrigerators—as might be found in the home of a high school student and a working young adult. When culture develops on-campus, it is almost exclusively a function of cocurricular activities (Cowley & Waller, 1935; Hilberry & Keeton, 1968). More cohesive and unique collegiate cultures are generally found in smaller, more homogenous environments, with a less diffuse curriculum (Cowley & Waller, 1935; Hummon, 1994). Student cultural typologies have been developed by Astin (1993), Clark and Trow (1966), and Horowitz (1987).

Institutional typologies have been developed by Bergquist (1992) and Birnbaum (1988). Birnbaum described four models of organizational functioning in higher education: collegial, bureaucratic, political, and anarchical. He writes that these models serve as necessarily reductive conceptual frames, making the point that these frames are often used as sense-making tools by members of the organization. Bergquist describes four cultures: collegiate, managerial, developmental, and negotiating. Birnbaum and Bergquist are both careful to remind the reader that no institution is of one culture or type only. At most institutions, one culture will dominate while the other three might be present to varying degrees.

### **Cuban's Typology of Change**

Larry Cuban's (1999) study examines curricular reform efforts in the context of university structure and academic norms. This focus on norms makes Cuban's study especially salient to the aims of my study. Cuban sets out to answer two questions: how has the academic work of research and teaching been affected by the structure of universities and the processes of their operation, and why has

scholarship won out over teaching as the *raison d'être* for university faculty? Focusing on the structure of the research university, he argues that this structure facilitated the triumph of research over teaching, thus stunting any actual reform of general education, leaving it instead to be little more than modest change. Cuban develops a typology of change, aligning it along the two axes of depth and breadth, creating the quadrants of narrow breadth/little depth, narrow breadth/much depth, wide breadth/little depth and wide breadth/much depth. Any proposed or adopted change will fall into one of the quadrants. After change has been implemented it is possible to judge whether the change is incremental or fundamental.

Cuban distinguishes between incremental reform and fundamental change, arguing that the latter is more comprehensive and foundation-shaking. He argues that at Stanford there has never been fundamental reform to the general education curriculum, just incremental changes in the form of movements back and forth between the basic structures of core courses and a distribution scheme.

Cuban writes that the demands placed upon universities are multitudinous and incongruous, and demand so much accountability to so many external agencies that the university is hard pressed to develop internal coherence. Within the university, the main cogs in the teaching wheel, professors, are hired to teach but rewarded to research. Good and renowned research is a major source of financial and affective rewards for the institution. Teaching is not. Essentially, a university has to answer to too many outside masters and in turn sends mixed messages to faculty about what is important. Without referring to it explicitly, Cuban affirms Birnbaum's (1988) "organized anarchy" construct.

## Research Design

Western Protestant University was one of three institutions selected for a larger study of general education reform. Purposeful sampling, the technique used to select all three institutions, is appropriate when the researcher seeks to locate similarities and differences across types of organizations (Creswell, 1998). The goal of purposeful

sampling is to attain a sample for qualitative inquiry from which the researcher “can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

Data were collected via in-depth, on-site interviews with academic administrators involved in the general education reform process. Altogether, 18 faculty and senior academic administrators were interviewed during a week-long site visit to the WPU campus and during follow-up telephone calls. Some participants were selected with help from the assistant to the university President. To avoid selection bias, I used a cascading or snowballing approach to locate additional people to interview, asking at the end of each session who else would be appropriate to approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Document review helped to confirm that the initial list was comprehensive and to locate additional interview subjects. Interviews were tape recorded, with the option given to the participant to make off-the-record comments. Telephone interviews were conducted with people not available during the site visits and for follow-up interviews with a few subjects interviewed on-site. Interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality as a condition of participation. An alias is used for the institution name, and job titles or pseudonyms are used to identify respondents.

The interviews were designed to be semi-structured and open-ended (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Maxwell, 1996). The typical interview began with the respondent being asked to describe the basics of the reform process, the nature of decision making at the institution, and whether the general education reform effort in question was typical and representative of institutional decision-making processes. The capstone questions to each interview dealt with the form and substance of culture at the institution. Each interview lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes, depending on how much time the respondent had made available or how quickly the interview progressed. For triangulation (Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Maxwell, 1996), more data were collected via examination of reports from committees and/or administrative units tasked with directing the process. Typical sources were: minutes from meetings of faculty senate or assembly and memos to faculty from the committees charged with overseeing the reform or from the academic administrators not part of the committees but central to the change



process. In addition, campus publications including student newspapers and alumni magazines were sourced when available.

Analysis was inductive and in accordance with the constant comparative method within grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987). I attempted to identify common themes and patterns via coding of key terms into broad conceptual areas. The coding and definition of new categories were repeated until the analysis yielded no new concepts. These conceptual categories were considered both on their own merits and in relation to each other with respect to the insights they had to offer within the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature.

The limitations to this study are those common to many qualitative investigations (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The most obvious issue is that of history and time. The curriculum reform effort under analysis took place over the course of more than 6 years, culminating 5 years prior to the interviews. Though most people interviewed had a consistent recollection of the major facts, some interviewees confessed to forgetting details. Though there exists a sufficient amount of documentary evidence such as memos, meeting records and faculty assembly notes, the accounts of most meetings are not extremely detailed, and the minutes of some meetings are missing. Because nearly all of the students involved in most of the reform efforts have graduated, their voices are not adequately represented in descriptions of institutional culture with respect to its effect on the curricular change process. Technical problems including tape recorder malfunction, poor recording environment (HVAC noise, street and other ambient noise), and accidental erasure have rendered useless the audio recordings of two interviews. Notes made during the interviews, while not complete, served as an adequate means to reconstruct the conversations.

### **Context: Western Protestant University**

Western Protestant University is a religiously affiliated institution located in the western United States and owned by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). Founded in the 1890s, WPU has evolved from a tiny academy catering to a small sect of Lutheran

settlers to a modestly sized institution offering Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Religion was certainly an important element of WPU's founding, and while it does currently play a significant role in the culture of the institution, it is not the pervasive force that it was as recently as the early 1960s. Still, unlike the vast majority of institutions founded as sectarian colleges during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, WPU has maintained a close relationship with its founding church. In addition to the institution being owned by the ELCA, members of the governing board, as well as the Provost and President, must all be active in the church.

WPU comprises six schools and colleges—a College of Arts and Sciences; a School of the Arts; and four professional schools of Business, Education, Nursing, and Physical Education—that enroll a total of 3,400 students, 90% of whom are undergraduates. Despite the presence of select graduate and continuing education programs, WPU is first and foremost a teaching institution, integrating the liberal arts with training for the professions.

## Findings

### *Institutional Culture at WPU: Substance of Culture*

The values of *friendliness* and *collegiality* are important: at WPU, people are genuinely nice. The expectation is to treat others well and to be treated well by others. There is great importance placed on being a good colleague. This is accomplished not only by being friendly, but also by being visible on campus, whether around the office or at the Faculty House for lunch and by participating on service committees. WPU is thought of as a *student-centered institution with an emphasis on undergraduate education*. Western Protestant faculty take seriously the delivery of undergraduate education. Success in that arena is a major predicate for promotion and tenure. Also within the academic sphere is an emphasis on interdisciplinary teaching. Despite interdisciplinary efforts, there is an undercurrent of tension between the “upper” and “lower” campuses, or the liberal arts and professional sides of the school. Enrollment is split between these sides in roughly even numbers.

*Religion* plays an important role in WPU life. It is explicitly present by virtue of requirement that the President, Provost, and Board must all be active members of the Lutheran church, by the presence of religion courses in the general education curriculum, and during formal rituals such as convocation and commencement. Academic values are informed by the Lutheran tenets of faith and reason and by the importance of service. WPU trains students for lives of service to the greater world, but service to the institution is an important value among faculty. Small but significant fundamentalist groups among the student body highlight the differences between students and faculty, who are thought to be more liberal than students. There are some differences of opinion between faculty and the Board on how to best articulate religion in the context of the WPU mission statement.

The values of *self-reliance* and “*scrappiness*” were mentioned often during the course of the interviews. They stem from WPU’s long-standing fiscal woes, dating to the founding of the institution. People take pride in being able to do more with less and working hard and sacrificing to keep the institution in good working order. This does not mean that they necessarily enjoy having to work harder with fewer resources, but that they understand it is a necessary fact of life at WPU.

### *Institutional Culture at WPU: Forms of Culture*

*Campus mise-en-scène* and *architecture* are significant cultural forms. Abundant green space, tree-lined walkways, and low-rise buildings offer an idyllic representation of the archetypal small college. The old chapel sits between at head of the campus square, a constant reminder of WPU’s Lutheran roots. The music building is designed in a classic Scandinavian style. Most buildings are named after WPU historical figures, and most of those names are Scandinavian. An “upper” part of campus that houses most of the liberal arts programs is separated by natural boundaries from the “lower” half of campus that houses some of the science and professional programs. *Statues* and *objects* are also stand out as representations of WPU culture. A Viking ship hull sculpture, rune stones, a bust of Martin Luther, and other items serve as explicit reminders of

Scandinavian and Lutheran heritage. The rune stones were installed to commemorate the visit to campus by Norwegian royalty.

*Rituals, formal and informal*, serve as active reminders of WPU's heritage. Convocation, commencement, and chapel are formalized signifiers of WPU tradition, and are infused with both traditional academic and Lutheran elements. Faculty march in traditional academic regalia, religious banners are hung, and ministers offer blessings. Though daily chapel attendance is no longer mandatory, some offices close and no classes are scheduled during the period reserved for chapel. The President's house is the scene of some informal rituals during commencement and freshman orientation each year. These informal gatherings, typically family picnics, underscore the value of community. Post-faculty assembly gatherings at the Faculty House signify the values of friendliness, collegiality, and community among faculty.

### *The Curricular Reform Process*

In June of 1986, then-Provost Ringstead issued a memo to the faculty in which he noted that WPU's general education curriculum, known as the General University Requirements (GUR), was in need of change. The most recent change to the GUR had been roughly 15 years prior. At the time of the Ringstead memo, WPU actually had two sets of GURs. There was a traditional distributive core, in which students chose from a menu of options to fulfill requirements, and an integrated studies core, in which students chose from a select group of specially designed interdisciplinary courses that covered a range of basic subjects. Students had the option of which set to use to satisfy their general education course load. Most students chose the traditional distributive core.

Of major concern to the Provost was how to address contemporary issues within the framework of the liberal arts tradition central to the WPU educational experience. Another important concern was the coherence and structure of the freshman year. Faculty echoed the concern of Provost Ringstead's memo that the freshman year experience at WPU was "unstructured," that there was a need for a common experience, and that it was important to train freshmen "how to do what we want them to do" rather than to focus on content.

By December 1986 the Provost, in conjunction with the Faculty Assembly, formed an ad-hoc committee of faculty and administrators to review both the state of affairs of general education at WPU as well as recent reports on general education in the United States for the purposes of creating a report to disseminate to the WPU community. That report, "Perspectives on Core Curriculum and General Education at WPU," was released in March 1988. The perspectives included essays on the importance of liberal education and the value of various permutations of general education. The report was a mix of essays culled from the materials that the committee had been reviewing and original essays drafted by committee members specifically for the project.

Each academic year, just prior to the beginning of the fall semester, WPU faculty gather for a short conference to address current academic issues. The 1988 Fall Faculty Conference was devoted to dealing with general education and generated ideas and requirement proposals from both faculty and students. The time had come to put together a working group to develop a proposal, and in the fall of 1988 the Faculty Assembly's Committee on Committees put forth a slate of nominations to form such a committee. Representatives were culled from the major academic disciplines—natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities—as well as from the professional schools. Also included was a member of WPU's academic advising staff. The GUR Restructuring Group (GURRG) operated as an ad-hoc committee, with the standing Educational Policies Committee given nominal oversight for GURRG.

In September 1989, approximately one year after formation, the members of the GURRG sent to their WPU faculty colleagues a report offering rationales for both the thematic and the distributive cores. Among the justifications for the distributive core were that it helped ease the difficulty of defining and teaching essential knowledge, that it served the need for discipline-based instruction to catalogue knowledge, that it allowed students more freedom in choice selection, and that it was a more pragmatic use of resources such as energy, time, and money. Committee members made the case for making standard the thematic core by noting that it would rid the core of seeming like an obligation that students dreaded dealing with, that cross-disciplinary training would lead to greater

intellectual breadth, that it would enhance faculty growth and development, and that if given institutional status it would not be the drain on resources that introductory core courses can often be.

At this point the pace quickened. A new provost, Bob Neilsen, came to WPU and assumed administrative oversight for GURRG. He urged the committee to “be bold,” to “not tinker,” and to “go beyond turf issues.” At this meeting GURRG split into subgroups, each group charged with discussing and possibly developing thematic, distributive, and hybrid GUR models.

Toward the end of September 1989, GURRG issued a memo that set a timeline for the development and implementation of the new core, and announced a series of forums to which all faculty were invited and encouraged to attend. The forums were to be divided by cluster education and social sciences; physical education; arts and humanities; and nursing, natural sciences, and business. GURRG hoped to have discussion and voting on a new core wrapped up by the end of the calendar year, with course development to follow and a phased-in implementation to begin in the fall of 1991 and completed by September 1993.

GURRG’s work had not gone unnoticed by students. In late September of 1989 a story about the GUR reform project appeared in the WPU student newspaper. Some faculty interviewed for the newspaper story were skeptical of the thematic version of the core that GURRG members had been hinting would be at the heart of their proposal. The main concerns centered on the ability of a thematic core to deliver knowledge as well as discipline-based courses and how resources could be properly allocated to allow for the development and implementation of a thematic core.

Accompanying a memo dated October 6, 1989, GURRG sent to WPU faculty three proposals—two for a distributive core and one for a thematic core. The memo indicated that the faculty assembly meeting that following Friday would be devoted to discussion of the proposals. Faculty were asked to be prepared to discuss all aspects of the proposals: the merits of the thematic core versus the distributive core; whether new courses be added or existing courses used; should credit hours be adjusted to three from four; and if there should be some sort of capstone experience.

The minutes from the October 13, 1989, faculty meeting were sparse, but remarked on "extensive and detailed discussion" of the core proposals, which interviews with faculty corroborated. The main points of contention seemed to be that faculty did not think GURRG had proceeded as mandated, that they had not adequately made their case for the changes they were advocating, and that the committee had operated too much in a vacuum, not paying enough attention to changes in the larger world of higher education. There were also serious concerns over whether the institution could afford to implement the thematic core.

Following the October 13 meeting, GURRG went back to committee and emerged with a better explanation of the congruence of a new core and WPU values. They took to heart the criticism that the goals of the new core proposals were not effectively communicated, despite the fact that they seemed to think that the failing was more on the part of faculty not paying enough attention to the initial report issued in 1987 and for not attending the first round of open forums and asking questions of GURRG members about the proceedings of the committee meetings. Notes from a committee meeting held the week immediately after the October 13 Faculty Assembly meeting indicate that GURRG discussed how the new core should look in terms of purposes and outcomes. GURRG members viewed the outcomes of an effectively constructed core to be: critical thinking, capacity to reason, appreciation for other ways of life, awareness of alternative epistemologies, self-confidence, effective writing, effective public speaking, aesthetics, character, virtue, leadership, and intellectual curiosity.

It would be a full year before any discussion on general education took place in faculty meetings. GURRG wanted to address faculty concerns and present a coherent and complete proposal. They met frequently during that time, at least once a month during the academic year. At a November 1990 faculty meeting GURRG formally presented their suggested changes, which essentially amounted to making the thematic integrated studies core the sole model of general education, thus eliminating the distributive core. At the same meeting, two other proposals for general requirement change were introduced, each made independently of GURRG. Discussion on the models was tabled to the following month's meeting.

In advance of the December 1990 meeting, GURRG followed up the introduction of the alternative models with a memo to faculty. The memo contained a series of questions about the purposes, philosophies, and mechanics of each model, as well as questioning how different specific elements of the alternative versions were from the GURRG model. The apparent goal of the memo was to stimulate discussion at the December faculty assembly.

Details are scarce regarding the content and tone of the discussion about the various general education models that took place at the December 1990 faculty meeting. Meeting minutes do not provide much detail, and faculty interviewed for this study had a hard time separating their recollections of the many meetings devoted to studying the reform effort. What is clear is that there was so much difference of opinion over which general education model to pursue that GURRG would spend most of the spring 1991 semester working on refining their proposal. Attempts to obtain consensus about both the content and the process served to delay any outcome. By now, more than two years had passed since GURRG was formed to overhaul the general education curriculum at WPU.

The first step undertaken by GURRG during the next phase of the process was to survey faculty on the various models introduced as possibilities for the new set of requirements. The survey, returned by 56% of faculty, yielded no consensus. The integrative model was the least disliked, and GURRG proceeded to work on that model for presentation at the April 1991 faculty meeting. The survey also questioned faculty as to whether they thought there was even a need to change the requirements. A 7-point scale was used, with 7 being "strongly for" and 1 signifying "strongly against." An almost equal number of faculty were at the extreme ends of the scale, 29% scoring 1 or 2, and 31% scoring 6 or 7. About 10% were undecided, but a handful more scored 5 than 3, indicating a slight inclination to change the requirements.

In order to give general education sufficient attention, a special session was convened on the last Friday of April 1991 to discuss the topic. Many amendments were put up for vote at this meeting, among them a move to eliminate two of the more controversial elements of the model, the writing seminars and literature study sections. These provisions were controversial primarily because they



would require faculty not specifically trained in writing and literature instruction to lead classes in those areas. This motion was defeated at first, but reintroduced later, then passed and seconded. Another motion seeking to remand the process back to committee was defeated as well. Owing to the importance of the issue and the difficulty in coming to a consensus, faculty voted to convene at another special session the following week.

The second special session and the regular meeting the following week produced no resolution. It was now May 1991, the end of the academic year, meaning no faculty-wide discussion would take place for at least three months. In fact, despite regular GURRG meetings, no substantive faculty-wide action took place until February of 1992.

Two faculty meetings were held in February 1992 and the reform process finally regained some momentum. GURRG once again came to the faculty with the hopes of getting a vote on a proposal. However, unbeknownst to GURRG members, yet another alternate version of the general requirements had been developed by a small group of faculty from Arts and Sciences. The introduction of this latest proposal at the February faculty assembly meeting caused quite a bit of friction. The requirements were the subject of heated discussion for most of that meeting, at a special meeting held two weeks hence, and at the regular March meeting. Finally, at the March 1992 meeting, faculty voted to keep for discussion only one version of a general education model, this being the alternative model introduced at the February faculty meeting.

After more than two years of meetings, the faculty had for all intents and purposes settled on a new version of general education, which in a general structural sense was not substantively different from the older version. A distributive core still existed as the default general education requirement, along with an integrative thematic core that students could choose as an alternate. The major changes were the addition of a freshman year program, some changes to the writing component, and the addition of a diversity requirement, this last inclusion a small victory for GURRG, as it was part of their original proposal. Faculty reported that the original distributive core was made a bit more coherent. GURRG was not able to institutionalize the integrated studies core, but neither was that core dismantled. The

thematic core had enough support from faculty to continue to exist as an alternative for students who did not wish to take courses via the distributive core.

## Discussion

It is not unkind to consider the general education reform effort at Western Protestant University a failure. It failed because the intention of the curricular reform committee to completely restructure the system conflicted with a reticence on the part of the rest of the faculty to embrace such sweeping change. They were attempting, per Larry Cuban's (1999) model, a fundamental change. The impetus for fundamental change came from senior administration. The cruel irony of the process of general education curriculum reform at WPU is that some significant cultural touchstones played unexpected roles. The value of consensus only served to delay the process, as meetings upon meetings were held to study and debate curricular reform issues. Missing during the end game that finally brought the process to a close were the value of collegiality and the idea that all voices are equal. Resource allocation problems abetted the delay, as faculty were hesitant to take on a potentially expensive and time-consuming proposition. The place of religion at WPU played a minor but significant part in the process. This section begins with a brief examination of the outcome of the reform process in light of Cuban's typology of change and a more detailed explanation of those elements of institutional culture at WPU that had significant effect on the process.

### *The Extent of Change*

Cuban (1999) would term the WPU general education change process as "enclaving," or the incrementalizing of a fundamental change with institutional breadth. The reform of general education as per GURRG's first plan was to have institution-wide effect and would have radically altered the delivery of this part of the curriculum, moving the entire program to an interdisciplinary core, effectively eliminating the distribution scheme. The result was

affected by the inordinate amount of time that the process took and the undermining of the value of collegiality and consensus upon which the assumptions of a successful reform effort rested. Budget concerns were among the reasons cited as the roadblocks to the full implementation of the interdisciplinary scheme. As Cuban notes, culture, structure, and processes (in this case, resource allocation) are the building blocks of a university. The following sections explain how at WPU the building blocks of institutional culture determined the outcome.

### *Consensus, Process, and Collegiality*

On the surface at least, the process began in concert with the relevant prevailing cultural mores at work at WPU. The process was initiated by the Provost, and the Provost being the chief academic officer is essentially “first among equals” on the faculty (Birnbaum, 1988; Jenks & Reisman, 1968). Charged with managing the academic enterprise of the institution, he apparently got the process started with no quibbling. Faculty agreed at an assembly meeting that a review and overhaul was in order and elected a committee to do the work. These assembly meetings are identified as the linchpin of faculty governance at WPU. The members of the restructuring group were selected by and from the faculty. However, as the account of the process showed, all was not as rosy as it seemed.

The members of GURRG were understandably taken aback by the turn of events that closed out the reform process. They felt they had bent over backwards to be accommodating, and had been making an honest effort to develop a core that was a product of consensus among the whole faculty. They expected that the small size of the WPU community and the unifying nature of the intellectual and moral elements of their institutional culture (a product of the presence of religion at the institution) were enough to ensure an easy and collegial process. However, as Kanter, Gamson, and London (1997) note, size alone is not enough to ensure cohesion during a curricular reform process. Unifying moral and intellectual qualities must be present as well. Unfortunately for GURRG, the presence of these qualities did not help the process.

In their own words, GURRG members felt “sandbagged” and “betrayed” that their years of hard work were shunted aside for a proposal drafted outside the mainstream. One of the committee members remarked that “I sort of backed away from it. I felt frustrated that the Committee had done all this work and the faculty redid it in general session. Probably some of the last faculty meetings I ever went to.” A member of faculty not on the committee likened the decisive meeting to “a British parliamentary debate,” saying that there was “name-calling, [and] jeering.” A professor of anthropology called the meetings “intensely annoying” and thought them to be nothing more than the precipitants of lots of politicking in advance of the next meeting.

Though the general faculty sentiment echoed the comments above, during the interviews there was one dissenting voice with regard to the tone of those meetings. It came from one of the people responsible for the alternative proposal that GURRG members felt sabotaged their efforts. This professor of philosophy compared faculty assembly to “town meetings” with “extensive debates in the good sense.” His recollection was in the minority, however.

The description of faculty governance associated with the curriculum reform process seems dissonant with the oft-stated value of collegiality. WPU is not supposed to be a political institution where people tune out to the governance process because some voices matter disproportionately more than others when it the time comes to make major decisions. Yet, as one professor noted:

What happened was that the person responsible for presenting the case was not one of the opinion leaders for the culture. So the message that he tried to get out, while well-reasoned and supported by the committee, was not the message that was heard by the faculty. The way to get a message out is to tap into the lines of communication that people reference regularly.

The reality then, is that it does matter who advances what opinion, even at an institution where reasoned debate and collegiality are the way things are done.

GURRG also suffered from a lack of support from senior academic administration. The provost in office when the first round of faculty assembly meetings was held on the issue (again, not the same provost who initiated the process) was essentially absent during the assembly debates. Despite his exhortations to GURRG to be bold with their proposal, he did not provide sufficient support when the committee presented its case to the faculty. One committee member said of Provost Neilsen:

[He was] the least effective academic administrator [I've seen] at WPU. [He] encouraged GURRG to be forward-thinking and bold, but didn't support GURRG proposal to rest of faculty. [He] was absent when it was brought to faculty meeting.

Another GURRG member, a professor of business, noted that:

The Provost [provided] no more than a couple of pennies of leadership. He could have made a little more imprimatur. He was the provost, the CAO. There was a little cheerleading, but not a lot of leadership. You don't want to wave your hand and say "it was the will of the faculty." The Provost is the academic leader of the university.

There was no strong voice for GURRG efforts and there was apparently no protection from the alternative proposals made from outside the agreed-upon curricular governance process. The net effect was to leave GURRG hanging without the necessary support from senior officials, and to allow the various counterproposals to peel away whatever tenuous support there might have been for the GURRG proposal. If the provost is "first among equals" on faculty, and represents the will of senior administration in effecting change, then proper support from that office is a key element in advancing a change agenda. When the new curricular model is a bold departure from the status quo, and that boldness is a result of a provost's charge to a restructuring committee, then lack of support by the provost, for the committee, in the face of faculty resistance to bold change is nothing less than emasculating. The literature is very clear

on this, particularly Gaff and Wasescha (1991) and Kanter et al. (1997), who mention faculty-administrative alliance as a characteristic of successful curriculum reform.

This is not to absolve GURRG of any blame for how the reform process unfolded. Complaints that they were insular and defensive and did not communicate their ideas in clear enough fashion came from more than a few sources and should be taken into consideration. This poor communication must be taken together with the observation that GURRG lacked among their members any of the “important opinion leaders” from among the faculty, and the best possible explanation for the discrepancy is that these opinion leaders were not listening carefully to GURRG, and were the ones to level the criticism and advance the alternate core proposals.

### *Budget Woes*

Budget issues allowed faculty to retreat into the “enclave” of incremental reform. A completely interdisciplinary core would be costly to implement. Faculty would need, at the very least, time to develop new courses. This would necessitate a reduction in teaching loads, which would in turn necessitate hiring visiting or adjunct faculty. Further, professional development money might be needed by some faculty to design courses to fit the new model. Lindquist (in Gaff, Ratcliff, et al., 1996) and Kanter et al. (1997) are very clear with respect to the tendency for faculty to resist fundamental change if it is thought that future resource allocation might not fully support the activities necessary to accomplish the task.

The issue of the expense associated with an interdisciplinary core struck dead at the heart of a recurrent problem at WPU, that of limited resources. From its founding, the institution has almost perennially been on a tight budget, if not in financial peril. An oft-told story, used as a cultural touchstone to elucidate this point, is of the college’s first president trekking to Alaska to join the late-nineteenth-century gold rush, but returning with just a set of moose antlers for his efforts. Faculty who were concerned about the cost of a thematic core thought that it would add an additional layer of administration to WPU, and that the resources needed for new course development and implementation would weaken extant

programs. A senior administrator who was on faculty at the time of the debates and participated in a GURRG subcommittee noted that:

The cost issue was way too ignored by [GURRG]. Didn't fully get resolved, even in discussion on the floor of the faculty. Even though the Provost [Neilsen] claimed the money was there, that we can afford it. Various people were lone voices in the wind asking "is the money there?" "We don't think it's there." Practicality was another issue. That's why the [alternative] proposal was successful, because it was viewed as more practical.

### *Religion*

Religion at WPU was described in interviews as something with "residual influence," an "invisible giant," and something that "gives us a sense of being." Given that the Board and senior administrators must be members of the Lutheran church, religion does exert a functional influence on campus. The primary effects of religion on WPU academic life seem to occur through infusion—the ideal of service has its roots in Lutheran values and is a significant element of the identity of WPU. Similarly, the Lutheran ideal of a dialogue between faith and reason and the Lutheran intellectual tradition are the undergirding linchpins for the lack of tension between religion and secular academic topics and for the value placed on academic interdisciplinarity. While academic freedom and interdisciplinarity are hardly unique to WPU, that they exist in the way in which they do at a religious institution is a direct effect of WPU's Lutheran heritage.

While the answer to the question of the "just how Lutheran WPU should be" was easily resolved insofar as the undergraduate religion requirement, a more deleterious outcome came during a recent failed attempt to draft a mission statement. The process resulted in a bit of enmity toward the Board on the part of a faction of faculty. Faculty had drafted and unanimously passed a mission statement that the Board tabled without ratifying, in essence a pocket veto. The Board felt that the mission statement did not explicitly

enough tie the institution to the church. Again, the Board, along with the President and Provost, is the only body of the WPU community required to be active in the Lutheran church. The end result, as a WPU professor notes, is that “nobody would now want to serve on a mission statement committee.” So religion, while a factor in some major institutional decision-making moments, was not as much a factor in the general education reform process. The underlying message is that the Board will give faculty a fair amount of leeway in curricular matters, not expecting religion to suffuse every fiber of the curriculum. However, in matters of how the institution is represented, the Board expects WPU to be clearly thought of as a Lutheran school. Faculty had assumed that the ethos guiding the curriculum would hold sway in crafting a mission statement, and were disappointed when the Board essentially nullified their work and asserted their more conservative values.

The members of GURRG recognized that the core should uphold the ideals of WPU, specifically its Lutheran heritage and the value of service. Indeed, though it was briefly suggested that the religion requirement be reduced from two courses to one, that proposal was quickly dismissed. While religion does not play an overwhelmingly explicit role in daily student life or academic policy at WPU, there was enough respect for the school’s Lutheran background to ensure even this modest level of religious interaction in the curriculum.

### *Faculty Roles, Rewards, and Involvement in Governance*

The discrepancy between the intentions of GURRG and faculty perceptions of how the committee operated is easily explained. The complaints of faculty regarding the manner in which GURRG went about their business reflects the stereotype of faculty disengagement from everyday governance matters. Despite the efforts of the committee to involve WPU faculty in the development stage, their invitations were generally ignored. Few faculty attended the open forums. Though WPU faculty describe themselves as fairly well-engaged in matters of governance, attendance records for faculty assembly meetings, combined with the meager attendance at the GURRG forums, illustrate a fairly typical pattern of faculty



behavior. Unless a major issue is being addressed at a faculty assembly meeting, and unless it has had some advance notice as being an important agenda item, the attention paid to matters of governance are not likely to be especially great. In fact, attendance at faculty meetings (not counting the first session of an academic year) is typically greater when there is a hot-button issue on the agenda. This was certainly the case during the autumn of 1989. The meeting devoted to the new core drew 87 people, while attendance at the subsequent meeting was only 58.

### *Interdisciplinarity*

There was a general consensus among GURRG members that the integrated studies/thematic core, or Core II as it was commonly called, should definitely be kept, if not adopted as the single model for general education at WPU. Many faculty interviewed spoke glowingly about Core II, one going so far as to call it “one of the most rewarding” parts of his twenty-five-plus year career at WPU. The strong sentiment to make the integrated core the default core speaks to the value placed on interdisciplinary work at WPU. There are a variety of interdisciplinary programs and majors available to students, and faculty members actively seek to develop new courses across fields and disciplines. GURRG was simply putting to action an important institutional cultural marker.

### **Conclusion**

The curricular reform process at WPU took eight years, from the point at which Provost Ringstead initiated the process with his memo calling for change, and the actual implementation of a revised, though hardly new, general education core. It was six years between the formation of the GURRG committee and the implementation of the new core. The core was discussed at no less than five major faculty assembly meetings, including two specially called meetings. By all accounts the process took an inordinate amount of time, and in the end, it was the attempt to adhere to the processes of deliberation and consensus-building that kept the reform effort from

reaching a more timely conclusion. Most surprising, it was a rather noncollegial approach that was credited with bringing the process to conclusion. What the faculty at WPU were left with was a general education program that looked, for the most part, like the one they set out to change.

A contentious faculty assembly meeting resulted in bruised feelings on the part of many participants. Not only was the tone of the meeting less collegial than the norm, but it featured an alternative proposal advanced by a group working outside the formal process. This action was quite surprising, given that an early criticism of the curriculum reform committee was that they had operated too far outside the explicit structures and implicit norms of the WPU institutional governance process. The action came about because the initial faculty resistance to the fundamental change envisioned by the reform committee was thought to be too ambitious and costly. Resource allocation issues, a constant fact of life at WPU, stalled the process, opening the door for the alternative proposal. In the end, the reform effort was a drawn out affair that left some people with bitter recollections of their involvement in a significant area of faculty governance.

The lessons learned from the WPU experience are rather simple. First, in any decision-making process as important as curriculum reform, the committee charged with the task must have the unequivocal backing of the senior academic administration—especially if it is the senior administrators who are encouraging the committee to take risks. Second, consensus and deliberation are important, and adhering to these cultural markers is important if the process is to retain any legitimacy in the eyes of the faculty. However, given that faculty are busy juggling multiple responsibilities, and given that their attention to governance matters can be fickle, brevity is important as well. In attempting to be thorough and sensitive to faculty expectations with regard to consultation and input, GURRG members allowed the process to drag on. Lastly, even if a campus is considered to be free of politics (and politicians), chances are that it is not apolitical. When scarce resources are at stake, be they operational dollars or student credit hours, there will be competition to get at the pieces of the pie in that are play during the change process.

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