The Evolving Nature of Online Organizational Structures in Higher Education Institutions

Does Structure Matter?
Study Primer & Preliminary Findings
Who are we???

• Collegiate Online Research Leaders (CORAL)
• CORAL is comprised of educational administrators from a diverse set of higher educational institutions across the United States who were participants in the Online Learning Consortium’s (OLC) 2018 Institute for Emerging Leaders in Online Education (IELOL) program. CORAL collaborative members are engaged in several research studies.
• This study was planned with advisement from the lead researchers of the CHLOE reports.

Say HELLO team!
And, who are you??

Animated image of candy
What we were up to…

• Qualitative inquiry
• Research Questions
  • What are the implications of the current structure of the online unit within the institution?
  • What are planned changes to the current structure?
• Thirty-two higher education institutions with online units/departments
• Utilized Organizational Design concepts to shape interview guide
• Series of three semi-structured interviews
Who has supported us...

- **CHLOE** researchers (a joint research group representing Quality Matters and Eduventures) helped us solidify our purpose and direction.
- Online Learning Consortium (**OLC**) helped us spread awareness and recruit participants.
- National Louis University (**NLU**) awarded us a Seed Grant to fund the project.
- And, the support of each of our institutions to lend our time to this work!
Who we talked to...
What we talked about...

- Academic Functions
- Student On-Boarding
- Student Support Services
- Administrative Functions
Talked within the context of...

- **Work specialization**
  - The degree to which tasks in an organization are divided into separate jobs.

- **Chain of command**
  - Answers the question of “who reports to whom?” and signifies formal authority relationships.

- **Span of control**
  - Represents how many employees each manager in the organization has responsibility for.

- **Centralization**
  - Refers to where decisions are made in organizations.

- **Formalization**
  - The degree to which rules and procedures are used (not simply codified) to standardize behaviors and decisions in an organization.
What we heard...Academic Functions

• **Non-traditional** organizational designs are prevalent.
• What the online unit manages varies, though it most often does not include management of online faculty.
• Online units and their leaders are all **thinking about the quality** of the education and **consistency in student experience**, though it is not always easy for them to enforce this.
• Online units and their leaders lead from where they are, through “**coalitions of the willing**”, alliances, and the use of social capital, not always through formal authority structures.
• Online is growing at most institutions and is a strategic initiative, though **education, advocacy, and alliance-building is still critical**.

...and it all made sense to us!!
Want to play a game?

Animated photo of a girl excited about her cotton candy -- because we had candy planned for our in-person presentation!
| “...I feel like we’ve not treated online learning as a unique field of expertise until the last three years or so.” | “[we] can’t be islands anymore” |
| “...we don’t want policies with a ‘capital P’ for everything...they [informal policies] need to be high level and form sort of a framework...let’s build ‘standards of practice’ [instead]” | “We aren’t the *wild-wild-west*, but we’re definitely not formal...[we] excel at building *coalitions of the willing*” |
| My role is focused on “build[ing] coalitions and shared understandings...identifying the flowers that we want to keep and fertilizing the ones that need to get better and maybe trimming the ones that don’t” | “...there are still faculty that you have to prove over and over again that online can work” |
| “...one of the challenges that I run into in my role is either a misunderstanding of online from our leadership around the institution, or a belief that it is, for some reason, easier.” | }
Our next steps…

1. Coding of interviews #2 and #3 will be completed in May.
2. Final results will be compiled in July & August.
3. Triangulate our data with CHLOE data.
4. Publish findings Fall of 2020

Your next steps…

1. Drop us a line if you want to contribute to follow-up studies and/or
2. to hear about the final results!
See you soon!

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