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July 15 Reality Check

Rearranging the Deck Chairs

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

How universities are organized can confuse not only the sympathetic, casual observer of higher education but students and staff members as well.

One campus has a college of arts and sciences, another has separate colleges of sciences, humanities and social science. Microbiology can be in the college of natural resources and environment at one place, and in the school of sciences or the medical school somewhere else. Modern foreign languages appear organized in departments that encompass all of the modern foreign languages and their literatures, in departments devoted to Spanish and Portuguese, French and Italian, or other combinations.

Insiders know, however, that all of these organizational permutations reflect not only significant changes in the universe of knowledge but also internal structures of personality, politics, money and power as well as the external pressures of fad, fashion or funding. Academic reorganization is a frequent exercise on university campuses, and often generates tremendous controversy because each effort signifies a potential for gain or loss in academic positioning for money, power and prestige.

Although, to outsiders, the warfare that these reorganizations frequently provoke can often appear out of proportion to the stakes involved, insiders know that organizational structure can influence internal distributions of resources. Even more importantly for many faculty and students, the organizational structure serves as a prestige map.

Reorganizations that adjust the boundaries of campus subunits are among the most complicated of issues because often reorganization is a good and effective thing while in other cases that look almost the same, it is a scam. Reorganization as an internal political exercise occurs frequently, but so too do readjustments to reflect the expansion and redefinition of knowledge. Separating the substantive from the political requires some careful observation.

For example, the development of a subdiscipline into a major field of study is a complex and fascinating process that produces new departments such as computer science or biomedical engineering. The emergence of new departments or academic guilds follows the development of specific intellectual domains with their own methodology, journals, research agenda, and definition of the particular intellectual skills required to advance knowledge in that area.

The academic guilds eventually determine what new fields have reached sufficient maturity of methodology and intellectual focus to warrant separate status as departments, with the attendant definition of a specific set of requirements for the Ph.D. and often a particular pattern of courses for an undergraduate major. Often national funding agencies and research foundations help advance these changes by supporting research based in defined departments that can give the new research direction and continuity.

Although these intellectual advances often produce some controversy about the point at which a subfield deserves to recognition as a major discipline with its own department, much of the controversy turns on legitimate intellectual issues of methodology and academic substance. These represent significant efforts to readjust the academic world to match advances in knowledge and the organization of scholarship.

Other reorganizations represent mostly varieties of academic game playing. They reflect much less academic substance and instead turn on issues of politics, power, prestige and money.

The game often takes place in shadow form, with highly evolved intellectual arguments that underneath speak to the issues of prestige and money. If one department consolidates with another, the loss in academic status for the members of this consolidated unit can be devastating. Similarly, if a field gains separate bureaucratic status as an independent department, a substantial status gain results. It is much better to be a department of Spanish than a field within a department of Romance languages. It is much better to be a school of journalism than a department of the College of Arts and Sciences. The goal of these organizational transformations is for subgroups of like-minded faculty to have a seat at the institutional table for the distribution of resources, rather than to suffer the risk of having someone less sympathetic to their particular subdiscipline speak for them.

Other organizational anomalies reflect historical, accidental or opportunistic events. Some institutions, concerned that the traditional arts and sciences reflected a domain too large for effective administration, divided the disciplines into subgroups: humanities, social sciences, and sciences or some variation. In such cases, departments like history reside within either the humanities or the social sciences, depending on the intellectual fashion of historians at the time of reorganization.

Business schools can acquire business-like units, and a management school at one institution may include such programs as sports and hospitality management while in another these programs reside in colleges of human performance or continuing education or in separate freestanding schools of hospitality management. Music departments live within colleges of humanities and fine arts or exist as separate schools of their own depending on their size, their focus on performance as opposed to theory or history, and the accidents of their original founding.

Many campus leaders take on reorganization projects to try to align the bureaucratic structure of units with a clear sense of the institution's academic mission. These efforts can provide a major focus of engagement for the campus, occupy faculty task forces and councils in heady debate, and then, after an extended period, produce a new organizational matrix.

The value of such reorganization varies. Sometimes reorganization can reduce the fragmentation of the campus produced by prior political warfare, consolidate micro-administrative units, and achieve some economies of scale in staff and management. In other cases, the reorganization simply serves to distract the campus from the need to work harder, better and more competitively. Reorganization changes take much time and energy and often substitute for the real work of requiring performance from the units. Reorganization is also a highly visible form of executive leadership that places senior administrators in publicity rewarding, take-charge roles.

The beauty of a reorganization initiative in this context is that it has no measurable outcome. No one has an obligation to demonstrate that the new organization is more effective than the old one, and even if it is more effective, the results will not appear for several years. Reorganization achieves the appearance of significant administrative leadership without an obligation to deliver any improvement in the quality or productivity of teaching or research. And refocuses everyone inward on the internal competition for position, place and money, diverting attention from the necessity of competing against the outside marketplaces of higher education.

Other reorganizations, however, follow the money. In cases where a particular subunit of a campus becomes remarkably successful at attracting external funding, a frequent result is a reorganization that gives the highly successful unit separate bureaucratic identity. Sometimes this occurs through the invention of institutes and centers, which are holding places for academic entrepreneurial success. In other cases, subunits of traditional departments or programs become independent departments, such as polymer sciences or legal studies. A music department can acquire external resources, hire nationally preeminent faculty, and emerge as a freestanding music school. A journalism department can expand its scale through grants, external programs, and fund raising and break free from a college of arts and sciences to become its own school.

For those conversant in the internal political dynamics of universities, the organizational chart of departments, schools, and colleges, and the list of centers and institutes, serve as a guide to the political history of the campus's intellectual enterprise. By reviewing this chart, a newcomer acquires a sense of the relative political power and intellectual and financial muscle of the various campus units.

University systems also have their own particular and peculiar organizational structures that they revise and reorder frequently, also in response to political and fiscal pressures of various kinds, but that is a topic for another day.

John V. Lombardi, chancellor and a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, writes *Reality Check* every two weeks.

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