

IMPROVING INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY

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Institutions of higher education do not have good memories. Caught up in the present and committed to the short-run future, colleges and universities are dependent upon the faulty recollections of those who once made decisions, took action, and determined policy. The most rational, analytical, and self-governing institutions in contemporary society are also dependent upon hastily scribbled minutes of committee meetings, poorly written memoranda and inner-campus correspondence, obscure policy manuals and guidelines, outdated organizational charts, and other ephemera that were never designed to be stored in institutional long-term memory, then recalled and reused by later presidents, deans, department heads, and faculty members.

The failures of memory are often dramatized in the change of administrations. As in national administrations, presidential papers and loyal staff members go with college and university presidents when they relinquish presidential authority and responsibility. If presidential staffs are not sworn to secrecy, they are at least obliged to give ousted presidents ample opportunity to write their own administrative history. And when presidents do write their memoirs, their personal memories are either too dim, too convenient, or too apologetic.

The long-term memories of universities are indeed deplorable. There may be no more than a dozen readable institutional histories of the nation's leading institutions, and "commissioned histories" serve primarily to gather dust on library and campus bookstore shelves. Their efficacy as a soporific has never been discovered. There are exceptions, of course (See Dyer, 1985, and Dressel, 1987), and most institutional histories, commissioned or not, are no match for the impotent, bloodless and brainless, histories of many business corporations. Yet there is a tendency for both colleges and corporations to restrict their long-term memories to board rooms and main lobbies. There, and nowhere else, are visitors likely to see presidential portraits, engraved plaques, and occasional busts of long-deceased leaders.

The loss of oral traditions for higher education's institutional roots is a special

tragedy. Unlike folk cultures of another day, most colleges no longer have spinster aunts to recite campus genealogies or loquacious uncles to respin yarns from institutional “wars of succession.” Four-year liberal arts colleges at one time would have had at least one senior-faculty raconteur whose institutional memories were crystal clear because they were rehearsed on every occasion. Most recently, senior faculty members with a memory-for-details have become unforgivable bores.

One reason for poor institutional memory could be that some institutional leaders would not have it otherwise. Letters may be written only to verify that a decision has been made and say nothing about the decision’s content or context. Inner-campus memoranda are more likely to remind the recipients that they have not fulfilled the letter of spoken agreements. Presidential correspondence, although the basis for many policy decisions, will often be regarded as classified and secreted away in closed archives until all identifiable participants are deceased. And in the midnight decisions of departing administrators, much of their correspondence *will* become personal. Other *essential* communications simply do not exist. Decisions made in hallways, over the phone, or at distant places may leave *no* paper trail, and future misunderstandings are solely a function of personal recall—and the individual’s authority to enforce his own.

Some critics of higher education are convinced that many administrative decisions are without memory of time and place. Pros-and-cons are discussed on many occasions, counterproposals are made, meetings are followed by phone calls—and active participants are later informed that the decision has been made. Even the most active participant in such a process may later learn that particular actions are the result of a “pending decision” *and* be amazed by his or her failure to recall exactly when or where.

MENTAL FILING SYSTEMS

Granting that much in institutional life is deliberately forgotten, what can be said for many other inexcusable failures of memory? Few administrators and faculty members have personal memories of their institution’s historical development, and very few have been present when major policy decisions were made. The number of founding presidents decreases daily, and the greying professoriate detects erosion in its creditability whenever it addresses institutional purpose, organization, and functions. Virtually all participants in institutional life would agree, no doubt, that institutional purpose, policy, and programs should not be dependent upon the personal memories of administrative officials and senior, tenure faculty members. They would also agree, but to a much lesser extent, that institutional purposes, decisions, and choices should be encoded in retrievable form for active use by those who later must be responsible.

It all suggests that institutional memory can be improved in much the same way that human memory can be improved. Colleges and universities need *not* hire memory experts to teach administrators the link, foci, or peg systems, but benefits can be gained from a reconsideration of the principles on which memory systems, mnemonic devices, and other memory aids are based. Some of these principles are as old as Aristotle's laws of association: similarity, contrast, and contiguity; and the bedrock of most memory improvement schemes is little more than active efforts to: (1) encode, record, or acquire; (2) store, retain, or remember; and (3) retrieve, recall, or reactivate human experience. All systems involve some kind of active associating, relating, connecting, or assimilating new experiences with older, more familiar, more easily recalled experiences. Some systems place a premium on visual imagery while others are purely conceptual or symbolic (see Higbee, 1977; Neisser, 1976; and Wittrock, 1977).

For examples, the link system suggests that historians have been wise to write about wars and kings because these were among the most vivid experiences that many of our ancestors had. National histories continue to be written in terms of national leadership, and national movements, trends, or developments are often personified one way or another. The foci system tells why Greek and Roman orators could speak for hours and always repeat themselves (on the next occasion). By making use of familiar places that have sequence, order, continuity, and content, orators could "place" topics and events in familiar images and recall abstract memories by visualizing concrete ones. Instead of using the Roman Forum for such purposes, however, contemporary administrators might want to use the football stadium where students, faculty, and alumni definitely have their respective places on Saturday afternoons.

Encoding, storage, and retrieval are facilitated in a more intelligent manner by other principles of organization. Institutional leaders who visualize well will prefer schematic representations of university purpose, functions, activities, and outcomes. Diagramming is still a useful way to communicate abstract concepts by depicting sequence, structure, stages, connections, relations; it can be a particularly effective way of showing antecedents and consequences, cause and effect, or simply direction and momentum. Synoptic models or cognitive maps are often useful in abstracting and relating the essential features of complex human experiences. Flow charts, mundane though they have become, are not a meaningless way of representing (for more effective recall and use) events and processes in institutional development. PERT (program-evaluation-and-review technique) has always been underappreciated in higher education. And the most intelligent presidents may indeed be those who keep a scale model of an updated campus plan in their offices.

Diagrams, synoptic models, cognitive maps, and other schemata always involve some risk of reification. If used wisely and well, however, they can

clarify perceptions, encourage conceptual focusing, eliminate nonessentials and thereby facilitate the encoding, storing, and retrieving of institutional experience. Such schemata need not be vivid, but vividness helps. No sober person has ever seen a unicorn, satyr, or mermaid, but most of us remember what they look like! Abstract concepts like liberty, truth, justice, *and* education are quite difficult to visualize, but there are times when they can be our most vivid (and meaningful) concepts.

ORGANIZATION AND MEANINGFULNESS

The basic principle for improving memory is the same for individuals and institutions: experience is more readily remembered and recalled when it is organized and meaningful! Institutions of higher education, however, have a special allegiance to the printed word. Scientists, scholars, and professionals are expected to write and to publish. The measure of their careers is thus the written word, the means by which many of them communicate best. To some extent, there is an expectation that anything worth remembering will be written down so that it can be remembered. And indeed, there is much to say in favor of writing as a means to more effective recall.

The “state of written communications” in many colleges and universities is nonetheless deplorable. Agendas, minutes, memoranda, and reports that should facilitate the recall of policy decisions are often scribbled without detectable organization and without awareness of later uses. The annual reports of departments, divisions, and schools are pyramided into institutional annual reports that contain many facts and figures but little information. In their brevity and in their misplaced emphases on “highlights,” many annual reports are a prescription for forgetfulness.

The written records of planning committees, self-study groups, faculty senates, promotion-and-tenure committees, external review panels, special study groups, presidential search committees, and administrative councils often bow in the direction of chronological order but they are surprisingly ahistorical in their organization, significance, and meaning. Little thought is apparently given to principles of organization that would facilitate encoding, storage, and retrieval. And in many cases, thoughts of later readers and users never enter the minds of those recording institutional decisions and choices.

It all suggests that the improvement of institutional memory would follow quickly and easily from well-organized, well-written, and more meaningful reports, memoranda, minutes, and other forms of inner-campus communications. Presidents, deans, and department heads need not “write for posterity,” but they should make every reasonable effort to communicate more effectively in writing. Institutional purposes, policies, programs, procedures, and outcomes

that are organized in meaningful ways for retention and use will, in all probability, be retained and used.

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