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The Politics of Information Management

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INTRODUCTION

Developing, sharing, and working with information in today's environment is not an easy task. With today's technological advancements, the management of information appears to be deceivingly easier. However, building and maintaining an infrastructure for information management involves complex issues, such as group consensus, access and privileges, well-defined duties, and power redistribution. Furthermore, higher education institutions are continuously faced with the need to balance the politics of information sharing across departments, whether the administration operates in a centralized or decentralized manner.

The need to develop, share, and manage information in a more effective and efficient manner has been proven to require a challenging shift in the norms and behavior of higher education institutions as well. This shift does not have as much to do with the actual use of technology as it does with the cultural environment of the institution. Davenport notes:

> Information cultures determine how much those involved value information, share it across organizational boundaries, disclose it internally and externally, and capitalize on it (Davenport, 1997, p. 35).

Depending on the history, people, and cultural environment, each organization faces its own dilemmas around the task of compiling and sharing information.

This case details one institution's attempts, at a departmental level, to develop an information system for planning and decision-making. It looks at the department's effort to manage and track students and to design a management tool that would help departmental faculty to function more effectively. It examines the challenges faced in managing information and the behaviors that drive new information management processes with the increased use of technology.

CASE QUESTIONS

- Whose responsibility is it to lead information systems integration in higher education? Who will or will not benefit from this?
- How do certain behaviors and group norms help or hinder the effective design and implementation of information systems?
- How can decentralized organizations negotiate and balance the competing demands and goals of the institution?

CASE NARRATIVE

Background

Midwestern University (MU) has an enrollment of approximately 15,000 students. Since it was founded, the mission of MU has been to provide world-class leadership in teaching and research. Within MU there are 15 academic departments and several administrative units. University administration had historically taken a very centralized approach to program enrollment, recruitment, financial aid, and general administration of student-related matters. However, more recently, top-level administration has encouraged individual departments to take more local control of their planning, ranging from student administration to budget setting. The push for local or departmental control has not been accompanied by the requisite development of reliable information systems necessary for both short- and long-term planning. This decentralized approach has placed departments at a distinct disadvantage due to increasing levels of accountability at the department level.

Historically, information such as student enrollments and financial aid allocation flowed downward from central administration offices to the departmental level. The upward flow of information consisted of a set of checks and balances associated with departmental graduation requirements. In addition, data that were specific to the department level did not flow upward (e.g., faculty advising lists and student progress reports). Administrative divisions were centrally managed with multiple databases tracking data in functional units. For example, enrollment data were maintained and controlled by admissions, but the graduate studies office controlled doctoral student data. Many of these systems were run with old and outdated software, and the university struggled with the lack of a coordinated information system that managed all data collected throughout the university. This resulted in issues of data integrity, redundancy, and accuracy, with a low level of trust concerning the interpretation of data.

Enrollment data were maintained at the university level. These data were available to assist the department in knowing how many students were enrolled during a particular semester. However, it could take three to four weeks to obtain data from the central student information system, and field definitions were seldom defined. Additionally, because students were not centrally tracked through the various stages of doctoral completion, it was difficult if not impossible to ascertain the types of classes, services, and faculty commitment that students required with any degree of certainty. Departments relied on anecdotal information to conduct planning, and this became a standard and acceptable practice by default. Additionally, many faculty suspected that there were dozens of students who slipped through the cracks in the process somewhere along the line and might have been precipitously close to dropping out.

There was also a high level of dissatisfaction among MU students with regard to information management. Students were frustrated with the number of repetitive steps and processes involved in their educational experience. For example, students needed to register for classes at the registrar's office. However, depending on the class students wanted to register for, they may have needed to receive departmental signatures prior to registration and then go to an entirely different office to make tuition payments. Because of the amount of time spent in completing these tasks, students' frustration level only increased when the data across these areas could not be shared.

The Arts and Humanities (A&H) department has approximately 200 doctoral graduate students, 200 graduate master students, and 300 undergraduates enrolled. Unlike the master