



# The Organizational Culture of the Research University

---

## Implications for LIS Education

John M. Budd

The organizational culture school of thought is a relatively recent notion in the field of organization theory and is a response to perceived shortcomings of other modes of thinking that may miss some important aspects, not just of organizing and the purpose of organizations, but of the real workings of organizations. The organizational culture of the research university is highly complex, because, in part, of the multifarious demands on and activities of the institution. This article examines the culture that pervades the research university, the problematic conflict between the cultures of university and of discipline, the implications of organizational culture for meaning formation and the reduction of uncertainty. Since this is the culture in which many LIS programs exist, the implications of the culture, especially regarding determination of success, are explored.

Even in organizational theory, the organizational culture school of thought (if it may be referred to as such) is a relatively new development. This article will demonstrate that cognizance of the constructs of organizational culture and of membership in the culture is essential to an understanding of the organizational place of library and information science (LIS). It seems evident that LIS education is caught between the Scylla of the culture of the university and the Charybdis of the culture of the profession; focus here is on the former. First, some background regarding this approach to examination is necessary. Previous theoretical approaches to organizations have included the study of bureaucracies, scientific management, structural theory, systems theory,

and the politics of organizations. To those who find the examination of organizational culture attractive, the other theoretical schools have serious weaknesses. For instance, Karl Weick says that a structuralist approach is founded on four key assumptions: a self-correcting system of interdependent people; consensus on objectives and methods; coordination achieved through sharing information; and predictable organizational problems and solutions.<sup>1</sup> He then concludes that these conditions seldom exist in today's organizations. Adherents of systems theory find its features (the structure of inputs and outputs and the ideas of entropy and equifinality) useful as both descriptive and analytical tools, but that theory is subject to many of the

### About the Author

*John M. Budd* is Associate Professor, School of Library and Informational Science, University of Missouri-Columbia.

---

same kinds of rarely occurring conditions as the structural school. As a result of the limitations, both of these approaches are judged by many to fall short as fully useful theoretical foundations.

The organizational culture approach is a response to the shortcomings of other modes of thought that might miss some important aspects, not just of organizing and the purpose of organizations, but of the actual working of organizations. Edgar Schein states that organizational culture is an encompassing phenomenon and includes such aspects of organizations and their members as behavioral regularities, norms (for output, kind of work, etc.), values that are embraced by the organization (such as "service" in libraries), rules for being a member of the organization, and the climate or atmosphere that springs from both the physical elements and the structure of the organization.<sup>2</sup> These elements, however, are reflective of something more fundamental—a set of beliefs and assumptions that are shared by the members of the organization, that are deeply ingrained in the organization *and* its members. Marvin Peterson and Theodore White agree with this social construction of organizational culture: it is "the deeply imbedded patterns of organizational behavior and the shared values, assumptions, beliefs, or ideologies that members have about their organization."<sup>3</sup> This essential element helps to shape the organization's purpose and image of itself (and its relationship with its environment, including those for whom the organization exists).

The foundation for organizational culture is, by its nature, social; it is a product of people who may initially share some beliefs and then who build and encourage a more fully developed ethos that defines that group's relationship and purpose. The social nature of organizational culture implies (rightly) that each culture is unique; while there will be commonalities among organizations, no two organizations will be exactly identical. With organizational culture the construction of a unified ethos is a complicated prospect, since the members of the organization have lives and exist in cultures apart from the organization as well. However, the organizational culture is frequently strong enough to influence behavior and attitudes even when the individual is removed from the group. As is true of all cultures, the organizational one becomes a part of each individual's identity; it is, to some extent, a defining feature of each individual. Organizational culture can pervade an individual's life because it is a kind of social representation. For instance, when asked questions about their means of employment, many people respond in terms that link them with specific organizations: "I work for AT&T." There is, as mentioned earlier, a sharing of beliefs, but there is also a reliance on communication as an essential element of the establishment and sharing of those beliefs. Effective communication can help the beliefs become ingrained in both the organization and the individuals. They can become so ingrained that, while their origins are no longer readily apparent, they attain a mythic

strength. The power of the sharing of beliefs often results in a reduction of uncertainty among individuals; there is a perceived constancy in the body of beliefs. William G. Tierney observes that the culture and its shared beliefs can be so ingrained that the members, and especially the administrators of the organization, are not fully aware of the way it works. One reason for the lack of awareness is that the administrators are, themselves, part of the culture.<sup>4</sup>

Leaders of organizations are part of the culture, not merely because they too work in that environment, but also because they, more than anyone else in the organization, have roles in determining the culture. Many of the examples offered in the business and management literature are from a top-down point of view, presumably because of the influence of leaders (titular or actual). Even Tierney's case study focuses on the role of the president of a university. One thing that Tierney's illustration does show is how vital vision is to the establishment of, or change in, an organization's culture. Further, the vision cannot be limited to a statement on paper or a press release; it has to be realized and lived. At times there are contradictions between formal articulations of vision and the everyday action of the organization; there is the danger that the formal vision either is intended to be or is perceived as purely rhetorical. There are complications, though, even with a seemingly simple scenario such as that of a university president who articulates a vision and alters the institution's culture by living that vision. While it is important to be aware of the influence that the person at the top has, it is equally important to understand that others in the organization have roles in forming the culture and in enforcing it. For one thing, the leader's influence may be limited; it is not necessarily true that a president is able to

offer a vision that everyone agrees with and accepts. There may be resistance because there is likely to be a culture already in place. In such an instance the leader might still have a substantial impact, but it could well be a negative impact, by sustaining conflict and polarization.

When a president is successful at articulating and living a vision that transforms the culture, it is frequently because at least some of the members of the organization are sympathetic to that change. This statement embodies a recognition that the faculty are a key element in the organizational culture of the university. A president, if he or she has a definite goal of altering that culture, must be aware of the impact of which the faculty are capable. The faculty tend to be the most permanent members of the organization (certainly more permanent than any generation of students and, at this point in time, more permanent than university administrators). The president can attempt to change the campus' culture by explaining the benefits of the change in terms that the faculty can accept. If there is acceptance by the faculty of such a position, then there can be accompanying change in the beliefs and behaviors of a vital segment of the organization. If there is little acceptance, the president may choose to impose the changes through the processes of retention and, especially, hiring. Once a change, for instance, of the nature of an increased emphasis on research, is begun, it is difficult to reverse it.

The assessment of organizational culture in universities, to this point, may seem a bit simplistic, since it has focused on the top administration of the organization. There are other factions within the organization, especially an organization like a university, that have strong influences on the creation, alteration, and maintenance of culture.

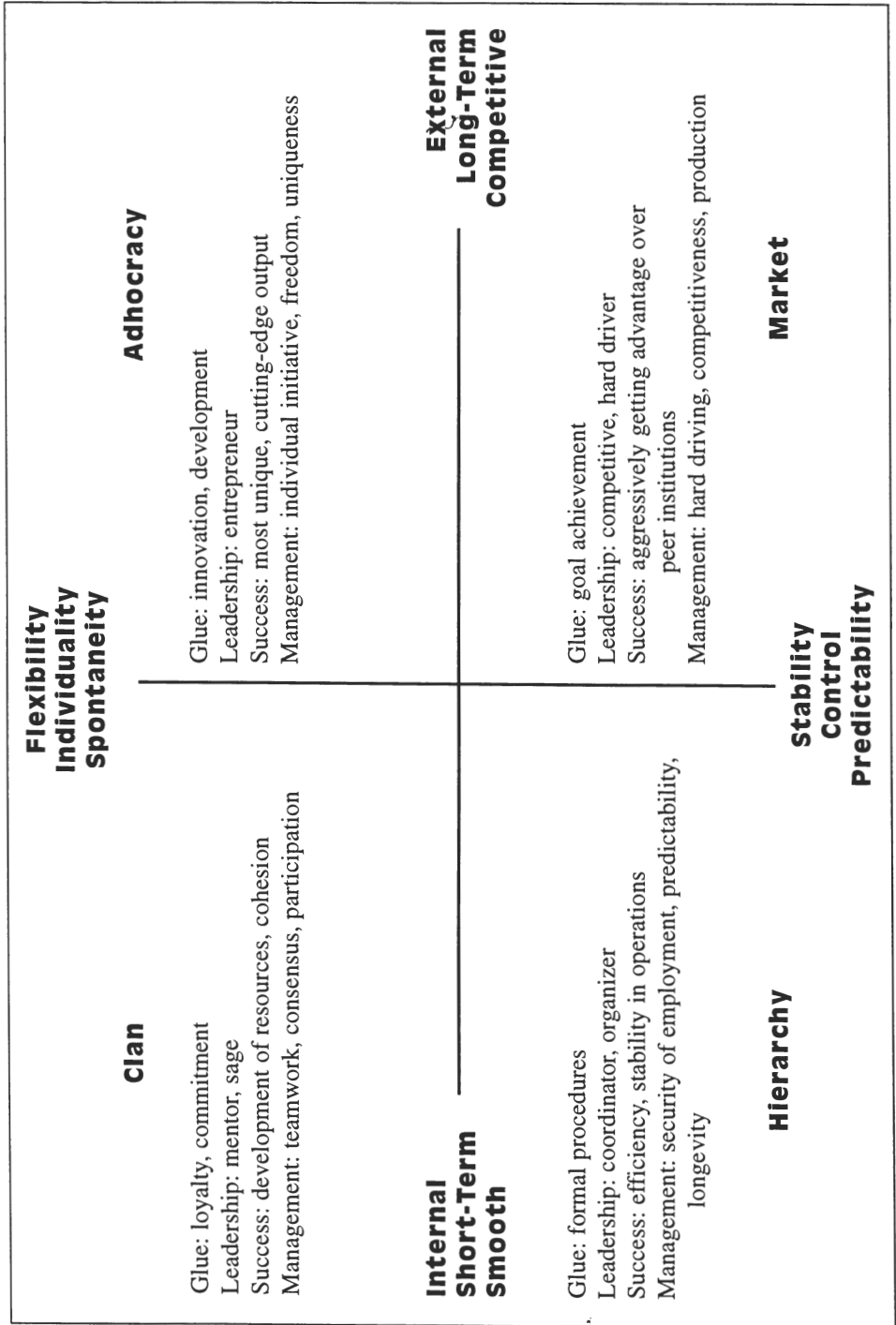


Figure 1. Matrix of Organizational Types (Peterson and White)

The multiple members of the organization, with multiple goals, ensure that the culture is a complex amalgamation of different, and sometimes conflicting, aspects. An awareness of the complexity of university culture is evident in the research conducted by Peterson and White. They surveyed faculty and administrators at a number of institutions and received 1,123 faculty responses and 311 administrator responses (a return rate of approximately 50 percent). They asked questions about four indexes related to organizational culture (derived from previous work done in other environments): flexibility, individuality, spontaneity; stability, control, predictability; internal, short-term, smooth; and external, long-term, competitive. They offered a matrix of these indexes, along with cultural types and their specific elements (see figure 1).<sup>5</sup> They found that faculty and administrators at comprehensive universities disagree on three key points.

Administrators tend to place more stock in teamwork and innovation, while faculty emphasize rational governance and attention to the market. Faculty rate (in raw scores) teamwork and rational behavior highest, but administrators rate teamwork even higher. The survey by Peterson and White suggests that organizational culture is not simply a single, given entity. There are multiple cultures and subcultures, frequently at odds.

One important manifestation of the multiple cultures on university campuses is reflected in the means by which knowledge is generated and communicated. Tierney observes that "knowledge is a discourse constantly reconstructed over time and place. The production of knowledge cannot be separated from the contingencies and continuous reconstruction of culture that individuals experience in their work lives. As a consequence, knowl-

edge cannot be arbitrarily divorced from organizational ideologies."<sup>6</sup> That Tierney uses the plural in referring to "ideologies" is neither coincidental nor unimportant. His own research is aimed at uncovering varying cultures at different types of institutions. He examines three very different schools and finds that, in each instance, the faculty's beliefs and behaviors are in agreement with the mission and intellectual stance of the institution. He concludes that the culture and ideology of each school guides how knowledge is produced. The culture and ideology of each also helps to shape definitions of what constitutes knowledge. Tierney appears to be adopting a realist view of organizational structure; he seems to be assuming that it is the institution and its leadership that determine the culture and approach to knowledge production. There is little doubt that there are strong institutional influences on culture, but these are certainly not likely to be the sole determinants. A more relativistic stance when studying organizational culture, its formation, and its sustaining is necessary. For one thing, it is highly likely that some faculty gravitate to specific institutions *because* of the perception of a preexisting match between individual and institutional goals. The latter view emphasizes the social aspect of culture and the realization that membership in the culture is not simply a matter of definition of the culture and then either agreement with or imposition of the culture. The attraction of people to a specific institution can only serve to entrench that institution's culture.

While Tierney acknowledges that disciplinary influences play a role in forming and sustaining the organizational culture, he does not accord these influences a major role. In a small, clearly focused four-year college, disciplinary differences in both means of

discourse and content of knowledge areas may be so limited that organizational culture is more greatly influenced by administrative elements of the organization itself. Research universities, though, are comprised of many more—and more diverse—disciplines. There are likely to be some cognitive foundations for disciplinary differences. By “cognitive foundations” I am referring to the intellectual activity of identifying questions, seeking potential answers, and evaluating progress. For instance, there may be a fundamental epistemological disagreement between, say, history and physics. The disagreement could manifest itself as a dispute regarding the definition of knowledge and the means by which knowledge is produced. This echoes Tierney’s observation of knowledge as discourse, a discourse influenced by the cultures of the participants. What needs to be recognized is the reality that discipline, as a culturally grounded community of like-minded scholars, is also a contributory ideological influence, affecting modes of thinking and practical matters, such as acceptable research questions and methods. In schools of library and information science it must be accepted that there are (at least) two fairly distinct disciplinary entities represented. The kinds of cognitive, epistemological, and practical differences that separate history and physics as cultures are also evident, though probably to a lesser extent, between library science and information science. The question is whether these differences are sufficient to result in unique cultural bases.

There is yet another manifestation of culture on the university campus—the department. While disciplinary cultures are generally distinguished by intellectual differences, departmental cultures, while not eliminating discipline as a defining characteristic, are

more likely to be founded on their political positions within the university. By this political foundation I mean the institutional decision making and strategic positioning that occurs in a university. Since resources are, to a considerable extent, distributed from central sources, and since there is no longer any guarantee that the resources garnered in the past will continue in the future, there is a considerable degree of competitiveness among departments. Competitiveness can tend to coalesce the members of a department into a group in which members share some specific goals—at one level to survive, at another to flourish—and behaviors aimed at achieving those goals. The behaviors may include securing students, especially those who will major in the subject area of the department, because allocated funding is frequently based on numbers of majors or student credit hours generated. The members of a department may cooperate closely for specific purposes—for instance, research projects—even though the cognitive link between those cooperating is not particularly strong. This kind of activity can ensure that resources such as funding from agencies external to the university benefit the department.

Each of the cultures mentioned above has its own perception of success. These perceptions are likely to govern, or at least to influence strongly, the behavior of the members of that culture. The determination of success is achieved internally within each cultural sphere; that is, those who are integral to the culture tend to control, to some extent, the discourse within the culture and to be most responsible for any articulation of the criteria for success. In the departmental culture, the department chair is in a position, if not to govern discourse, to be the first among equals and to influence the forum and establish the agenda for discus-

sion. In the disciplinary culture, those who have reached some level of prominence through their accomplishments may be heard above others. In that culture success probably mirrors the kinds of accomplishments of those prominent members. While their work becomes a measure of success it could also be contested and thus become a source of cultural change. In the overarching university culture the administrators are in the position of deciding what constitutes success, and they may or may not be amenable to open debate on those points. In the organizational culture, one important question is: How is agreement reached?

This question is not a simple one. It must be acknowledged that, while there are multiple cultures on any university campus (and only a few are mentioned here), the cultures are not equal. A clear statement of the principles of the university culture is necessary. Whether or not, however, the university president (or campus chancellor) also lives those principles is not the most essential aspect of the culture. Certainly if the president can be clear in his or her statements *and* can demonstrate personal commitment to them, then agreement will surely be enhanced. On the other hand, if such a demonstration is not evident, it does not mean that there is no agreement. Agreement on the criteria of success may be achieved over time, with attrition playing a major role, using recruitment as a means of bringing like-minded individuals together. The president, in the determination of what constitutes success, is probably influenced by elements larger than the campus—pressure from a board or legislature, agendas of funding agencies, determinants of prestige. The outside forces, coupled with the motivation of the president and his or her administration, can lead to the establishment of the criteria for success

by fiat. Even in recent years on some research university campuses the culture has been altered by the imposition of new definitions of success that have centered on specific measures of productivity (namely publication).

Where do the other cultures, disciplinary and departmental, fit into such an environment? The positions of these other cultures must be seen as subsidiary to the dominant culture. Regardless of their strength of numbers or the cohesiveness of their shared beliefs and behaviors, they are imposed upon by the central aspects, including the principal criteria for success, of the overall organizational culture. The preeminence of the most important of the criteria at research universities—publication—is accepted by all of the disparate disciplinary cultures. Witness a very recent statement by the president of the Modern Language Association: "Publications (whatever their form) are, of course, the sign of the creation and extension of knowledge in a field, which is what is supposed to distinguish research-oriented institutions of higher learning from other institutions. . . . For how do you teach language, literature, and culture in the classroom if there is no knowledge being generated or rethought?"<sup>7</sup> This statement demonstrates the usurpation of the key measure of success by a broad discipline, the humanities. Not only is the criterion recognized and accepted, but it is rearticulated as essential to the growth of knowledge in the discipline. What may be inferred from acceptance of the organizational culture's perception of success is that survival by disciplinary and departmental cultures may depend on consistency with the core elements of that conception of success.

What does all this portend for the culture of library and information science? First, it is important to realize that within library and information sci-



ence there are multiple cultures. LIS is a set of disciplines (as has been previously noted) and there are cultures based on, among other things, shared questions, methods, objects of study, and means of discourse. Because there are differences between the two broad areas of library science and information science, there are likely to be the kinds of conflicts that exist between any two divergent disciplines. Notably, there may exist some differences in the definitions of success. The criteria of disciplinary success may center on measures of productivity, including outlets of communication (the journals in which one's work might be published) and ascendancy of method (quality of inquiry ascribed, in part, to the method employed).<sup>8</sup> There is also the departmental culture and the potential conflict that may arise on a campus among departments. Depending on the university in which the program exists, either the disciplinary or the departmental culture may be the more cohesive, or divisive, one (although it is likely that the members attach or detach themselves to one or the other depending on a particular situation).

Because of the external control of discourse, the LIS program, as is true of any department or discipline, is subject to the criteria for success determined by the organizational culture dominated by administrators. This is not to say that flexibility or autonomy is impossible, but they are limited by the state of discourse (the extent to which it is open or closed). The viability of the program is dependent on the ability of its members to succeed according to the dictates of the prevailing culture—to publish in approved places (refereed journals, reputable book publishers), to attract funding from external sources, to integrate themselves and the program into the whole of the university, to recruit well-qualified students, and to graduate

those students. (To this list could be added to behave like a business, which can create yet another kind of conflict if the assessment of Daniel Seymour is accurate: higher education is a business; it serves customers, so it should learn from business how to define quality and to deliver a quality product to customers.<sup>9</sup> This thinking opens new areas of concerns that cannot adequately be addressed here.) The alternative to the above is articulating internal visions of success in ways that are perceived to be consistent with the received view, which emanates from the highest organizational levels. If the LIS program is unable to achieve levels of success impressive enough to the definers of success, then viability is in jeopardy. Such an observation is not new; the thrust of Marion Paris' study, *Library School Closings*, emphasizes the importance of success in the context of conflicting cultures.<sup>10</sup> As Paris reports, when members of the LIS programs respond, sometimes as they attempt to determine what is the best course of action for the unit, they betray the degree to which they are immersed in the departmental culture and, possibly, are oblivious to the organizational culture in which the unit must function. More essentially, they display a lack of awareness of the perceptions of success espoused by that larger culture.

In order to thrive in the university, the LIS faculty member must be cognizant of the admonitions of Patrick Terenzini. He maintains that, in order to understand the complexity of the university, three tiers of intelligence are needed: (1) technical/analytical intelligence, or familiarity with the categories, terms, and measures customarily employed in higher-education institutions as well as knowledge of the methods that might be used to explore the structural elements of the university; (2) issues intelligence,



or understanding of how the university functions, how decisions are made, what problems are faced; and (3) contextual intelligence, or understanding the culture of higher education and, especially, the specific institution, including the university's philosophical stance, its organization, its politics, its customs.<sup>11</sup> The LIS faculty member need not be an institutional researcher, but, in order to understand the context in which success is defined and its criteria applied, that individual should have the same kind of intelligence base of which Terenzini speaks. It is necessary to be a student of the culture(s) of the university; the consequences of ignoring the existence of culture and its manifestation, through articulation, of the requirements for membership can be fatal. Moreover, membership of the LIS program in the culture must not be taken for granted; it must be communicated to the administration in the terms of the culture's context, including the context of success.

### References and Notes

1. Karl E. Weick, "Administering Education in Loosely Coupled Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan* (June 1982): 673-76.
2. Edgar H. Schein, "Defining Organizational Culture," in *Classics of Organization Theory*, 2d ed., ed. Jay M. Shaffitz and J. Steven Ott (Chicago: Dorsey, 1987), 384.
3. Marvin W. Peterson and Theodore H. White, "Faculty and Administrative Perceptions of Their Environments: Different Views or Different Models of Organization?" *Research in Higher Education* 33 (Apr. 1992): 181.
4. William G. Tierney, "Organizational Culture in Higher Education: Defining the Essentials," *Journal of Higher Education* 59 (Jan./Feb. 1988): 2-21.
5. Peterson and White, "Faculty and Administrative Perceptions," 183; adapted from Kim S. Cameron and Deborah R. Ettington, "The Conceptual Framework of Organizational Culture," in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* 6, ed. John C. Smart (New York: Agathon, 1988), 356-96.
6. William G. Tierney, "Academic Work and Institutional Culture: Constructing Knowledge," *Review of Higher Education* 14 (Winter 1991): 201.
7. Sander L. Gilman, "What Should Scholarly Publication in the Humanities Be?" *MLA Newsletter* 27 (Fall 1995): 3.
8. See, for instance, Charles H. Davis, "On Qualitative Research," *Library & Information Science Research* 12 (Oct.-Dec. 1990): 327-28.
9. Daniel T. Seymour, *On Q: Causing Quality in Higher Education* (New York: American Council on Education and Macmillan, 1992).
10. Marion Paris, *Library School Closings: Four Case Studies* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1988).
11. Patrick T. Terenzini, "On the Nature of Institutional Research and the Knowledge and Skills It Requires," *Research in Higher Education* 34 (Feb. 1993): 1-10.