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## **OBSERVATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN HUMAN ECOLOGY PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

My comments are based on observations, not systematic research, which I first undertook last summer and fall. I submitted my initial ideas to eight human ecology or human sciences administrators whom I greatly respect, resulting in a paper for the 2005 Human Ecology Society meeting in Salt Lake City. Today I will review some of that original paper (Firebaugh, 2005) and add more recent observations and responses from administrators involved in structural changes in their units. I have included some of the lessons learned from the evolution of the Department of Home Economics at the University of California, Berkeley, from 1905-1954 (Nerad, 1999), and from Griffore and Phenice's paper, "Human Ecology in American Higher Education" (2005).

## **QUALITIES CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESSFUL HUMAN ECOLOGY OR HUMAN SCIENCES PROGRAMS, ESPECIALLY IN RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES**

- **Strong, visionary, sustained, and politically astute leadership.**  
In my estimation and experience, this is one of the most important of the qualities.
- **Leadership (and faculty) in harmony with university priorities.**  
Encouraging faculty to consider their work in relation to university priorities can open opportunities for new collaborations.
- **Faculty scholarship builds on (and, in some cases, contributes to) the extraordinary advances in the biological, physical, and social sciences.**  
Scholarship building on advances in genomics, computational sciences, material sciences, and other fields pushes the "envelope" of applied issues.
- **Faculty focus their research on the improvement of the human condition.**  
At Cornell hiring in the College of Human Ecology for the past 10-15 years has been almost entirely from disciplines outside of Human Ecology. Exceptions have been where the program had a "unique" perspective—applied nutrition, history of costume and textiles. The faculty commitment to the improvement of the human condition, irrespective of the disciplinary background, is important. One administrator of a merged unit noted that today many programs and faculty in her university are concerned with the human condition, thus this is not a distinguishing feature.
- **The college is an integrated organization that has a vibrant program of research, teaching, and outreach.**

Students from various departments or units take courses from across the college—not necessarily a set of “core” courses shared by all students in the college—and they have meaningful exposure to the college and its focus. Undergraduate students conduct research, and in land grant universities, research and extension are closely tied.

- **The unit makes needed changes in programs in a timely fashion**
- **The successful unit anticipates emerging issues.**

The trite term “cutting edge” is probably appropriate here—the successful unit is one that “sees” issues that are developing and early on moves programs, hires faculty and conducts research related to those issues. This does not mean a constant pendulum swing, but a steady conscious attention to emerging issues.
- **Faculty members want to be in and support the unit, have a well-developed interdisciplinary perspective, and work with colleagues across the campus.**

Griffore and Phenice (2005) noted the lack of support among faculty in the impending “demise” of the College at Michigan State. Being respected by faculty across the campus to the extent that collaborative work develops or that joint seminars evolve contributes to a successful unit, but not collaboration to the extent of exclusion of joint work with faculty within the college or unit.
- **Central administrators respect the depth of the research and publications emanating from the unit.**

Faculty publish in “top” journals; administrators and faculty recognize the challenges of publishing interdisciplinary research.
- **Leadership at the college and department level effectively confronts gender-based or disciplinary biases.**

A unit grounded in a traditional women’s field (such as home economics) may be viewed by central administrators (and faculty members) as seriously outmoded and unlikely to upgrade the university’s image. Nerad (1999, p. 138) noted the “covert stratification of the university via academic status and prestige. Women were irrevocably associated with low-status, low-prestige departments.”

Gender and disciplinary “discrimination” by administrators or faculty outside the unit may be a perception, not a reality. At one unit where major changes are taking place, a faculty member from across the university noted “the college of human ecology is no longer needed as an entry point for women to higher education.”
- **Strong alumni, donors, and friends as donors understand the contemporary program relevance and value and encourage programmatic changes in response to societal and scientific changes.**

Nerad (1999, p. 139) noted the need for “strong political and professional allies outside the university,” as one of the lessons learned at Berkeley.

## **FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH OR THAT ACCELERATE ORGANIZATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE**

### **Internal to the unit**

- **Differential strength of departments and centers.**  
Sub-units (departments, centers) may become strong, and outpace the college in their productivity and excellence, while the college has other units that are not competitive across the university.
  
- **Drift away from a cohesive unit with emphasis on specialization and the push for academic recognition.**  
Nerad (1999, p. 140) gave another lesson learned at Berkeley as “new programs need to walk a fine line between establishing a program with rigorous academic requirements and over-burdening the program for fear of being regarded as unscientific.” Griffore and Phenice (2005) note a lack of cohesiveness and sharing of an affinity for a core of ecological principles and concepts among the faculty at Michigan State.
  
- **Lack of political savvy and vigor on the part of the unit administrator.**  
Nerad (1999, p. 140) suggests a lesson learned that seems outdated now, but more broadly important in the past. “Women who forge into an organization, such as a university, dominated by men should dare to be unconventional and stand up for their own goals and values.”
  
- **Limited research productivity.**

### **Within the university**

- **Overall University changes in structure or organization.**  
One route seems to be reconfiguring the university that may have less orientation to collegiate and departmental structures, but rather toward putting together disciplines and building a university based on a vision of clusters of sciences—biological, health, high technology, social and physical sciences—with strong humanities.
  
- **Budgetary savings (real or ostensible)**
  
- **Pre-existing changes desired in the unit.**

### **External to the university**

- **Forces seek to eliminate redundancies and cut costs.**

State Boards of Regents or other external bodies may examine those entities “supported” by the state and insist on eliminating what they see as redundancies. I saw it many years ago in Texas when the Regents decided that only certain institutions should have graduate programs, others should offer undergraduate programs with particular specializations.

- **Lack of public support of the units' mission and programs.**

Non-governmental groups who have considerable influence on the state legislature may lose interest in what they think is the “old” home economics, or they may not support the new programmatic directions.

- **Questioning of contribution of unit and graduates to state economic development.**

An administrator of a merged unit noted the emphasis being placed on state economic development and the “survival” of those units that can demonstrate an effect on state economic development. Human Ecology, Human Sciences can show an impact of our programs in the prevention of problems, and in some cases, direct contribution to the economy, but we have not done as good a job, including in extension, as some other units across the campuses.

### **APPARENTLY NEUTRAL FACTORS IN ORGANIZATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE**

- **Size of enrollment.**
- **Long history of the unit.**  
The future lies in the science and accomplishments of today, not the rich history of a field or unit.
- **Extent of private annual giving and endowment levels.**
- **Efforts to increase stringency of promotion and tenure.**
- **Efforts to improve and upgrade program offerings.**
- **Effectiveness and efficiencies of programs.**
- **Excellence of the student advising.**
- **Level of external funding for research and outreach.**
- **Strength of alumni organization.**
- **Status of the unit among other units of human ecology and human sciences.**

### **OUTCOMES OF MERGERS AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE**

It's early to know the long-term effects of the current spate of mergers and organizational changes, but administrators of programs that have been merged or combined with other units reported several early outcomes.

- **Positive effect on faculty recruitment.**
- **Increased caliber of new faculty.**
- **Merged faculty with a shared vision.**  
An administrator gave as an example an education program with a broadened individual, family, community and consumer perspective and a human ecology

- program concerned with the individual, family, consumer and community having the view of comprehensive systems of education.
- **Sharpened and distinctive focus of the new unit that is problem based, such as on urban and vulnerable populations, or an intellectual niche.**
  - **Changes in faculty composition and focus of new faculty hires.**
  - **Regional model for operational support versus decentralized support for colleges and department.**
  - **Early positive changes in budgetary support.**
  - **Existing faculty face new expectations, values and culture.**  
Examples of such expectations are increased federal grants, publications in “top tier” journals, less appreciation of applied work.
  - **Merged unit must work through P & T policies, endowments, alumni relations, and operational details.**
  - **Uncertainties in extent, timing, and administration associated with changes.**
  - **Loss of some alumni support.**  
It took many years to re-involve alumni in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell after the 1969 change from the College of Home Economics. Changes far beyond the name took place at that time and some of the alumni felt this was not their college.

Change is occurring across the US—it will be interesting to see the changes that occur around the world in similar programs. I did not stress some of the basic factors contributing to change—changes in universities, societal shifts in the roles of women and the family, the decrease in the number of traditional families, the changes in patterns of living more broadly, the economic conditions. As major changes continue to occur in recently developed and less developed countries, we can count on increased changes in university programs in home economics, home science, family sciences, family and consumer sciences, human ecology—by whatever name.

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