When It's Not Business As Usual

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Abstract

Traditionally, on many college campuses programs such as engineering, technology, computer science and business have been located either in stand-alone departments or colleges. Yet, with increased pressure to control costs, university administrations are targeting them for consolidation. Such consolidations are designed to minimize college and departmental overhead without affecting the availability of courses and classes or the quality of student services. It is also hoped that synergies will evolve that will enhance the development of new and innovative programs and curricula to better meet the needs of students and employers.

What has emerged is the professional college. In the most general terms, it is the role of the professional college to prepare students to enter a recognized profession upon graduation. While a traditional college of business, engineering, the social sciences or communications might serve this same purpose, a professional college is unique in that preparation for diverse professions may be found in the same academic unit. Some of the diverse disciplines frequently found in a professional college may include agriculture, business, communications, computer science, engineering and engineering technology, family and consumer science, hospital administration, hotel and restaurant management, military science, nursing, psychology, public administration and social work.

Data discussed in this paper is the result of a survey targeting deans of professional colleges. It addresses such issues as the impact of this structure upon college management practices,

program accreditation, resource allocation and human resource policies and procedures. It also considers "what is in it" for the various stakeholders of the College. It concludes with a discussion of the benefits and some of the unanticipated consequences that have resulted from the implementation of this management structure.

Introduction

Traditionally, on many college campuses programs such as engineering, technology, computer science and business have been located either in stand-alone departments or colleges. Yet, with increased pressure to control costs, university administrations are targeting them for consolidation. Such consolidations are designed to minimize college and departmental overhead without affecting the availability of courses and classes or the quality of student services. It is also hoped that synergies will evolve that will enhance the development of new and innovative programs and curricula to better meet the needs of students and employers.

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Some "academic marriages" are more natural than others. For example, it is quite common to find together business and computer science, hospital administration, hotel and restaurant management or public administration. Another common union is computer science, engineering and engineering technology. Family and consumer science, hotel and restaurant management and travel and tourism are often grouped together. While one would hope that there is a rationale for the organization of a professional college, e.g. to meet the requirements of a common accrediting body, like NAIT [5] or ABET [2], in reality most unions have been driven by circumstances.

These events might include administrative cutbacks, vacancies in key positions, or faculty interests that have resulted in the development of new programs. The former events have been the more common justification for the creation of a professional college and have resulted in interesting combinations of disciplines. In some instances colleges are merged to form a larger single college [8, 10], whereas in other instances the discipline units within one or more colleges may be recombined with pre-existing college units or recombined into fewer, but new, college units [9].

The Survey

In 2004, a survey was distributed through the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International [1] to over 50 universities that had been identified as having

professional colleges. Professional colleges, for the purpose of the survey, were defined as colleges that included business programs, as well as programs in other professional disciplines such as computer science, engineering technology, family and consumer science, health care administration or public administration. Fourteen useable responses were received. These responses provide the opportunity to develop some very preliminary conclusions that may serve as the basis for further study.

Institutional Characteristics

Institutions with professional colleges share certain characteristics. In an exploratory survey, supported by the AACSB International [1], professional colleges were typically found at tier-two, public, regional universities.   As shown in Figure 1, a majority of schools indicated that the professional college had existed less than 10 years. However, several responded that their units
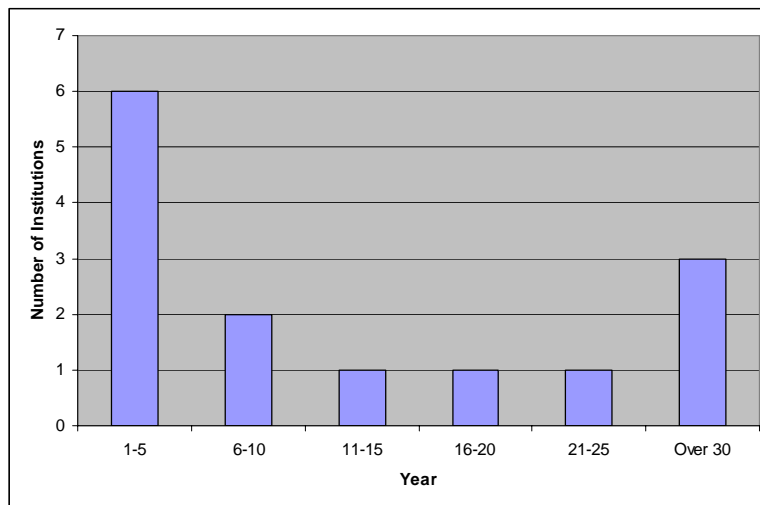
Figure 1
Years of Existence

had been in existence over twenty-five years. SUNY Brockport, whose School of the Professions, encompasses business administration, education, military science, nursing, public administration, recreation and leisure studies and social work, has been in existence over 50 years [6]. The University of Nebraska at Kearney's College of Business and Technology, which has existed for over 30 years, includes the disciplines of business, family studies and interior design and industrial technology [7].

Although the survey results are preliminary at best, it appears that the primary a motivation for the establishment of many of the more recent professional schools with particularly diverse programs was financial. In recent years, public, regional universities have been confronted with significant financial challenges—driven by declining financial support from state legislatures and public demand to control rapidly increasing tuition and fees. One strategy employed by universities, like other institutions, is to attempt to control administrative overhead, thereby

improving operational efficiency. A consequence of this approach at universities has been the merger of academic and support units to reduce administrative costs.

Decision Making

One of the outcomes of the merger of academic units is the realignment of decision making in the college. In a unit of 15-20 faculty, one would anticipate greater involvement of the dean or associate dean in routine activities. Survey respondents were asked the degree of centralization or decentralization in their college of decisions involving hiring of faculty, funding allocations, curriculum, fund raising, placement, and spending decisions. Their responses are shown in Figures 2-8.
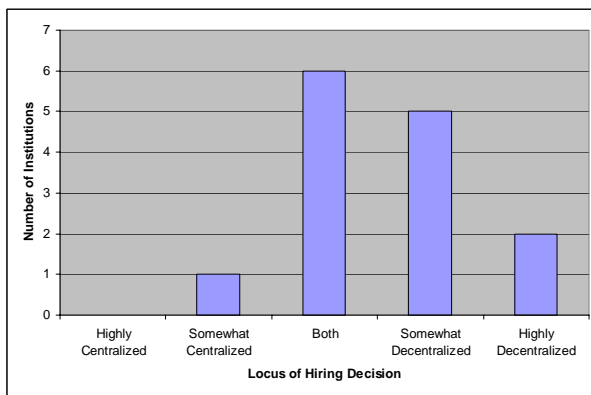
Figure 2
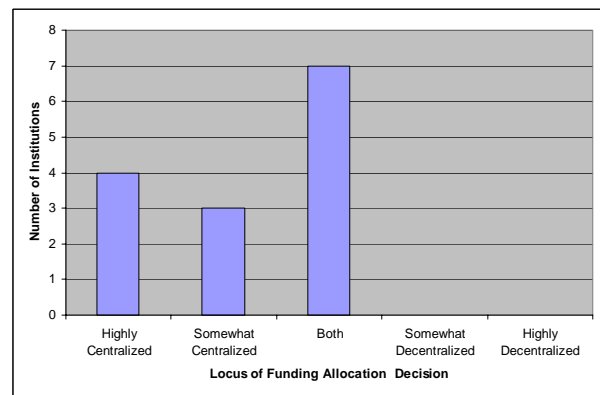Locus of Hiring Decisions

Figure 3
Locus of Allocation Decisions

From the responses given, the hiring of faculty appears to be a largely decentralized decision, which is done at the department level. The decentralization of hiring is driven largely by the diversity of programs in the college. Different academic programs frequently have different expectations for terminal degree, scholarly activity and creative work. These differences are the result of the accreditation requirements or practices within the field. While some disciplines find an individual with a master's degree and appropriate professional experience or certifications to be terminally qualified, other disciplines require the Ph.D., DBA, EdD or other doctoral-level degree. In respect to research or creative activities, what is acceptable for a faculty in digital media, such as an animated presentation that has been recognized in a juried show, would not be deemed research by an accounting faculty who focus upon peer-reviewed journal articles.

While the hiring decisions may be decentralized, the allocation of resources to fund these activities remains largely centralized in even the more diverse professional schools. Thus, while the dean may take responsibility for determining if a department may fill a position; the hiring decision is very much the purview of the academic department with final approval of the dean.

As shown in Figure 4, curriculum decisions in a professional college are even more decentralized than faculty hiring decisions. Again, individual departments are probably most knowledgeable about disciplinary differences and accreditation requirements that drive the curriculum process.

Also, curriculum at most institutions of higher education is owned by the faculty and not the administration.

Responses to questions on fund raising (Figure 5), placement (Figure 6) and assessment activities (Figure 7) run the gamut from highly centralized to highly decentralized. Because of the relatively small sample size, no statistically conclusive results can be drawn. Review of the data appears to indicate the more diverse a college is, the more likely that placement and assessment activities are decentralized. For example, a college that houses the business disciplines,
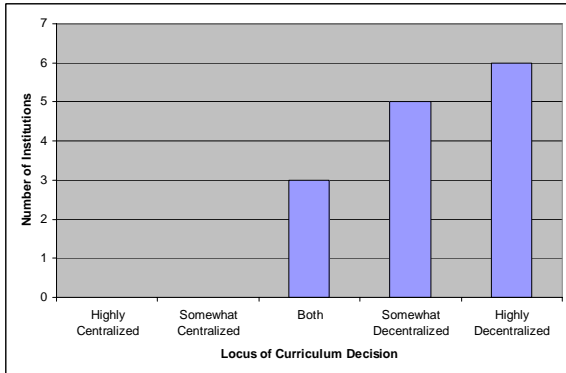
Figure 4
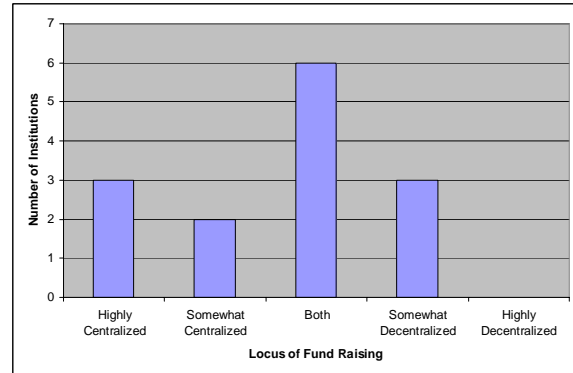Locus of Curriculum Decisions

Figure 5
Locus of Fund Raising

computer science and public administration indicates that its placement activities are centralized, while a second college that encompasses the disciplines of business, communications, political science and social work describes its placement activities as highly decentralized. One might attribute this difference to the various markets that a more diverse college would have to serve, requiring the involvement of multiple individuals each in contact with different employers. Assessment activities also follow a similar pattern—the more diverse the college, the more decentralized the assessment function. This tendency may be related to the existence of multiple accreditation bodies, each with its own perspective on assessment. In general, accreditations are awarded at the program level with programs being directly related to departmental units or sub-units—thus resulting in the decentralization of the assessment function.
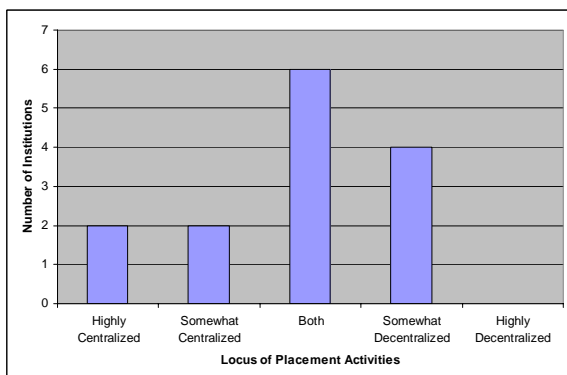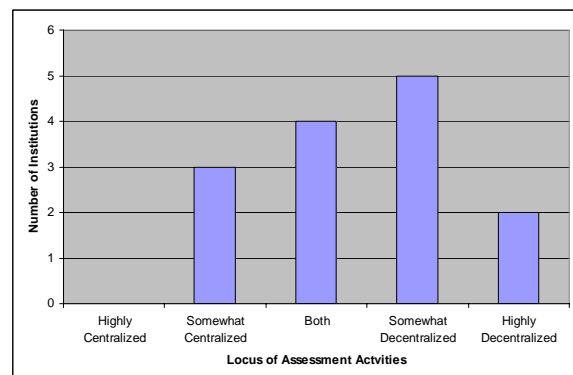
Figure 6
Locus of Placement Activities

Figure 7
Locus of Assessment Activities

The final function considered in this portion of the survey was the centralization/decentralization of spending decisions. While funding allocations were found to be largely centralized, spending decisions were generally decentralized, most likely at the department level.
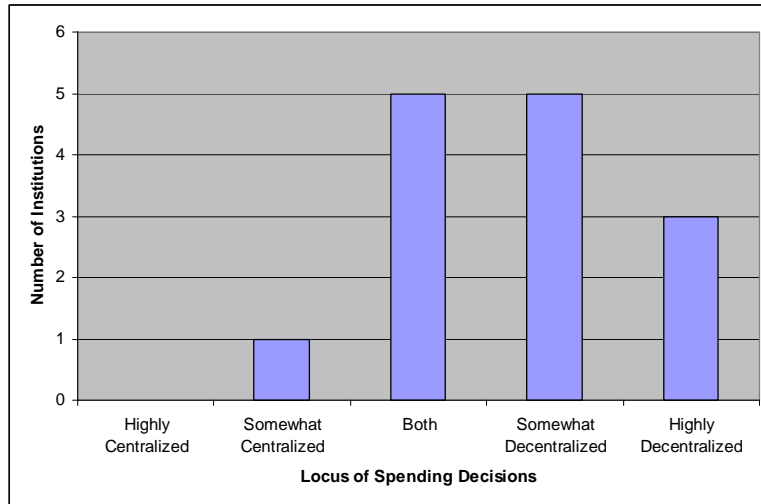
Figure 8
Locus of Spending Decisions

Challenges for the Dean

With responsibility for a significantly larger academic unit, one would anticipate that the dean of the professional college would encounter challenges not faced by administrators of more homogeneous units. When queried on this topic, a significant majority of the deans responding to the survey indicated that such challenges existed and these challenges were
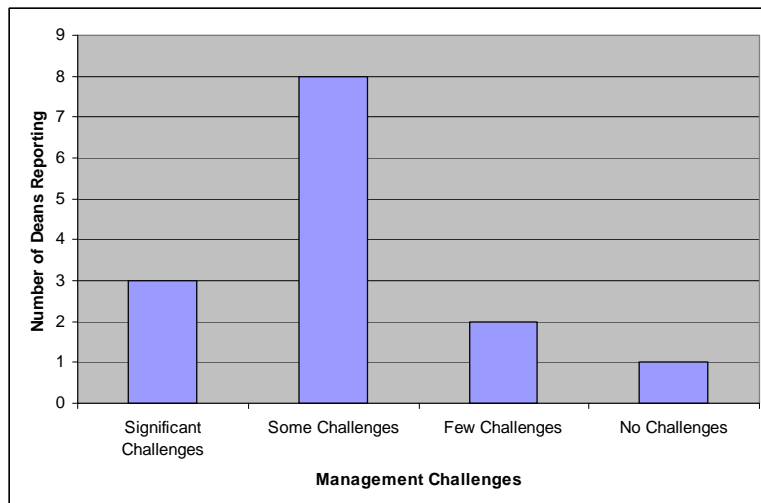
Figure 9
Management Challenges

primarily related to personnel matters including differences in promotions and tenure expectations, as well as workload and salary. For example, East Tennessee State University's College of Business and Technology was formed in July 2003 with the merger of its College of Applied Science and Technology and its College of Business. Disciplines represented in the new professional college include accountancy, computer science, digital media, economics, family and consumer sciences, engineering technology, finance, geography, management, marketing, military science and surveying and mapping [4]. Dr. Linda Garceau, one of the authors of this paper and the dean of the college, remembers that when faced with the possibility of the merger, faculty were most concerned that a uniform criteria for promotion and tenure would not be applied throughout the new college.   What constituted research, scholarly and creative activity differed from discipline to discipline. While the business disciplines emphasized peer reviewed journal articles, digital media relied upon juried exhibitions, and in engineering technology, patents received or grants awarded evidenced scholarly or creative activity. In addition to differences in what constituted such activity, its weighting in relation to teaching and service also differed by discipline. In some areas the typical teaching workload was 9 credit hours per semester, while others considered a normal workload to be 12 hours. As workloads increased, the emphasis upon teaching also increased and expectations for scholarly and creative activity declined.

Concerns were largely eliminated when faculty, having gone through the first series of promotion and tenure decisions, realized that both the college promotion and tenure committee and the dean were willing to use standards developed by the academic departments in making their decisions. Thus, variations in promotions and tenure criteria driven by accreditation standards or traditional disciplinary differences were respected and faculty felt fairly treated in respect to advancement and workload. The deans responding to the survey who appear to have reconciled promotion and tenure criteria and workload differences indicate that they use a similar approach to the one described.
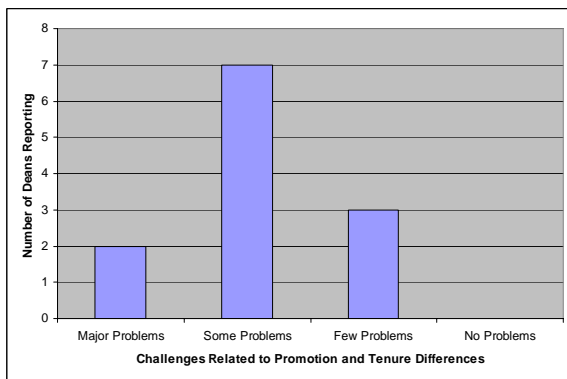

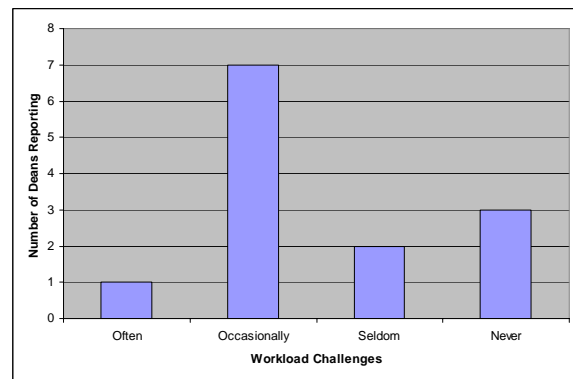Figure 10
Challenges Related to P&T Differences

Figure 11
Challenges Related to Workload Differences

An ongoing source of frustration for faculty and administration of a professional college is significant salary differences among disciplines. As one dean responded to the survey, "it is

difficult to motivate a faculty member who is making $40,000 less than a colleague in the same college." While there exists a level of concern, it is not of the same magnitude as concerns about the fairness of promotion and tenure decisions. One dean described the concern as "envy;" another as "frustration over not picking the 'right' discipline." While several deans alluded to pervasive problems with salary compression and inversion that characterize academia, another ascribed his lack of problems to reliance upon CUPA [3] or accrediting body salary surveys. These surveys provide faculty with information as to where they stand in respect to their peers in the discipline and can minimize, although not eliminate, frustration.
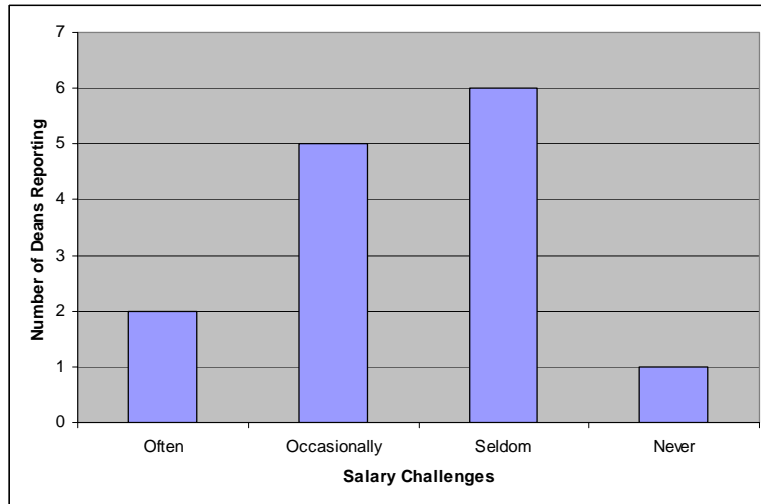

Figure 12
Challenges Related to Salary Differences

Accreditation

In addition to personnel issues, deans of professional colleges are challenged with the need to be informed about various accreditation standards. These standards can drive curriculum, promotion and tenure criteria and assessment methodologies. Deans of the majority of colleges responding to the survey indicate that they must address standards set forth by three to six different accrediting bodies. Standard differences challenge the dean who may have administrative experience in a single department and with one accrediting agency.

The dean may address some differences more easily than others—for example the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) accredits at the program level [2]. A single department may have several programs that are accredited by the various ABET commissions. Thus, the accreditation process can be managed primarily at the departmental level by the chairperson with the dean's office providing oversight. On the other hand, with degree programs that cut across multiple academic departments such as business, nursing or education, the dean must become more actively involved and take a leadership role in the coordination of activities.
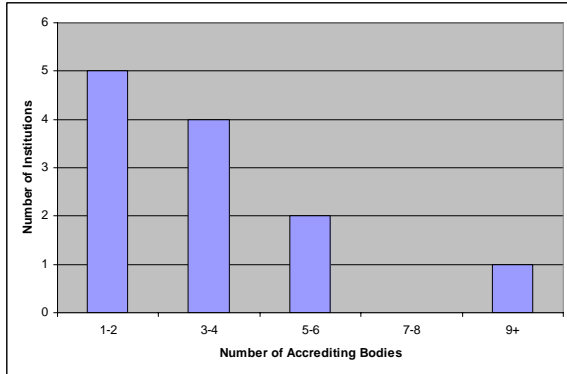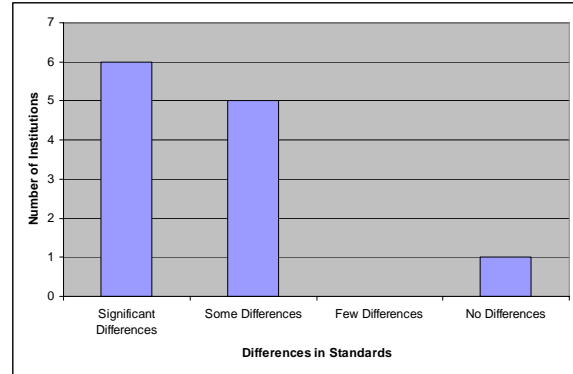
Figure 13
Number of Accrediting Bodies

Figure 14
Differences in Standards

When asked about perceived differences in accreditation standards, deans responding to the survey indicate that there are either "significant differences" or "some differences,." as shown in Figure 14. Challenges arise for the dean as they attempt to maintain familiarity with all on the standards, as well as reconcile practices to address the norms established by multiple accrediting bodies. Such norms pertain to faculty qualifications, curricula, workloads, staffing, technology, management practices, assessment, and intellectual activity.

Resource Allocation

Another potential source of tension in a professional college is allocation of resources. While the issue of salary differences has already been addressed, consideration must also be given to special needs of departments. For example, an engineering or engineering technology department may require costly instrumentation; business departments, access to financial databases; a digital media area, high capacity work stations to run sophisticated software; and a food service management program, a commercial kitchen. Dealing with the funding of these needs presents a challenge to the dean. In response to a question addressing resource allocation, most deans indicated that they used historical precedent to allocate resources or relied upon requests from the departments for special needs. In comparison to other responses, the allocation of resources to departments does not appear to be an area of concern for most deans. On the other hand, the actual funding for these special needs represents an ongoing challenge. While salaries must be paid, the investment in technical facilities is too often deferred because of lack of funding.
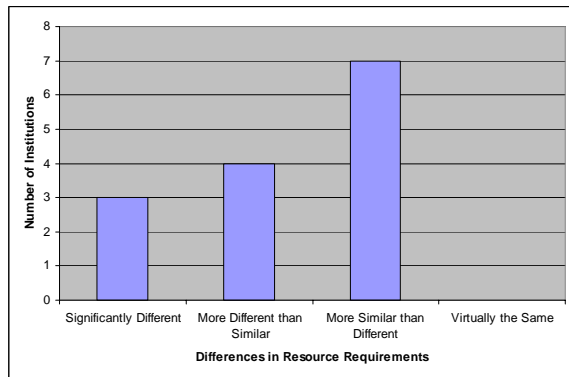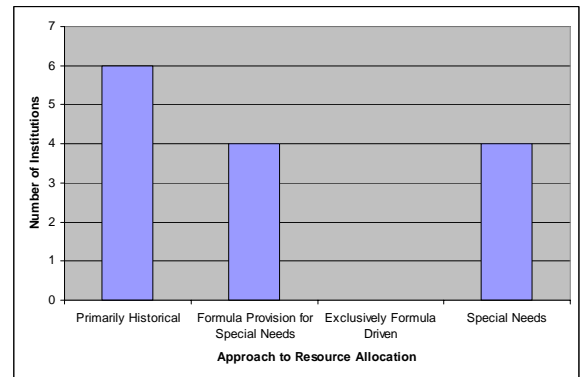
Figure 15
Differences in Resource Requirements

Figure 16
Approach to Resource Allocation

Other Challenges

The most common challenge, in addition to those just addressed, that faces the dean of a professional college is the need to create a cohesive unit from a diverse faculty with differing expectations in key areas like workload or promotion and tenure criteria. This was a challenge addressed exclusively by the deans of the newer professional colleges in the survey. Moving from a faculty of 40-50 individuals all located within a single building, to a faculty often in excess of 100 located in three, four or five buildings, presents a management problem. As one dean writes "it is difficult to meld a faculty together who come from diverse academic backgrounds and who are located in several different buildings on campus. There are opportunities for joint programs, but the faculty tend to want to stay in their academic silos." Another states, "some of the major issues were how to integrate the non-business units/culture/ mode of operation with the business units. This included such things as how to submit faculty annual reports, reports on internal and external activities and operations of the department. We prevented many initial problems, I believe, by bringing in an outside consultant to facilitate a two day off campus retreat so the faculty could get to know and work together during the retreat. We then set up a number of Task Forces to work throughout the first year on fully integrating the College with the business/non-business units and faculty."

The founding dean of a professional college encounters many of the same problems as parents of blended families. Inevitability, the dean must address the feeling among faculty and departments that "mom or dad loves you more than me." Whether it is in the departments from which the dean was drawn or in the dean's new departments, it is a potentially lose-lose situation. Recognizing and addressing this issue are the first steps to bringing a new college together.

What is in it for the Dean?

When deans of professional colleges were asked informally "would they do it again?" most of them responded positively. Being a dean of a professional college is not for the faint of heart or for the new dean. The dean must be able to handle multiple programs and departments with different demands and negotiate potentially difficult interactions with chairs and faculty. It is the

opinion of the authors, all of whom are deans of professional colleges, that while there is a steep learning curve for any new dean, to compound it by being a dean of a more complex, professional college would make success difficult.

What is in it for the dean of the professional college? Some say it is the challenge. While an experienced dean of a college of business, nursing or education may encounter some predictability in his or her day that is rarely the case for the dean of the professional college. Different faculty, different programs, different needs make for multiple challenges.

In the long run, deans of professional colleges may better position themselves for upward mobility and advancement to the position of provost or vice president of academic affairs. The deans of these colleges are typically responsible for larger academic units with more faculty and students. They embrace or at least understand disciplinary differences as they pertain to faculty, curricula and resource requirements. They are knowledgeable in the demands of the various accrediting bodies. In many instances they are becoming more like the deans of colleges of arts and sciences.

Conclusion

There are several challenges and opportunities facing deans and faculties of professional colleges composed of various business and non-business programs. Before creating a professional college as described in earlier sections of this paper, university administrators, deans, faculty, and other stakeholders should enter into candid and open discussions that define the specific goals and objectives to be attained by creating a professional college. The stakeholders of the newly created professional college should share a common vision of the future. Without this common vision, the various stakeholders may not understand why the college was created and may desire, overtime, to return to the organizational structure that existed before the professional college was formed. Having buy-in for the overarching goals and objectives for the newly created professional college from stakeholders will provide greater interdisciplinary harmony, cooperation, and collaboration between what otherwise may appear disparate academic disciplines. With a common vision, the professional college's stakeholders will have a greater likelihood of effectively and successfully meeting the college's future challenges and opportunities.

References

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[2]   ABET, International, Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, www.ABET.org.
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