

The Role of Public Relations during the Implementation of New General Education Curricula

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ABSTRACT

“Awful” and “worthless” are some words used by students to describe the general education curriculum at Virginia Tech. Currently, the university is about to implement a revised curriculum, in part, to make it more relevant to students. Virginia Tech isn’t alone in general education reform; around 90 percent of higher education institutions are in the process of assessing or modifying their curriculum. Beyond making general education more relevant to students, colleges and universities are feeling pressure to bring out of date curricula up to 21st century standards, with best practices being guided by external agencies such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities. With a new general education curriculum to be implemented at Virginia Tech, there is a need for a strategic and clear approach to communication to avoid confusion while also highlighting the benefits of the new curriculum. Research into change management, change communication, and public relations can inform this type of plan; however, the unique organizational structure of higher education institutions must be considered. This study seeks to bring those bodies of research together. Using a grounded theory approach, this case study analyzes the general education reform processes at three universities that have revised and implemented a new general education curriculum recently.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

“Awful” and “worthless” are some words used by students to describe the general education curriculum at Virginia Tech. Currently, the university is about to implement a revised curriculum, in part, to make it more relevant to students. Virginia Tech isn’t alone in general education reform; around 90 percent of higher education institutions are in the process of assessing or modifying their curriculum. Beyond making general education more relevant to students, colleges and universities are feeling pressure to bring out of date curricula up to 21st century standards. With a new general education curriculum to be implemented at Virginia Tech, there is a need for a strategic and clear approach to communication to avoid confusion while also highlighting the benefits of the new curriculum. Research into change management, change communication, and public relations can inform this type of plan; however, the unique organizational structure of higher education institutions must be considered. This case study of three universities that recently revised and implemented a new general education curriculum seeks to bring those bodies of research together.

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Introduction

General education gets mixed reviews from students on whether or not the curriculum is worth the time and effort. During focus groups at Virginia Tech, some students said they gained valuable skills and lessons from their general education classes, while others described their experiences as “awful” and “worthless” (Biscotte, 2015). In a 2010 survey, Virginia Tech students indicated they felt essential learning outcomes that link to general education aspirations such as integrative learning were important; however many expressed a disconnect in their education meeting those learning outcomes (Hall, Culver, & Burge, 2012). For more than a decade, the university has been going through a process to revise its general education curriculum, trying to change not only students’ perceptions towards the curriculum, but also to meet expectations of employers, higher education associations, faculty, and others. Virginia Tech is not alone in this endeavor. Almost 90 percent of higher education institutes with membership to the Association of American Colleges and Universities were in some stage of assessing or modifying their general education program (Hart Research Associates, 2009).

Much of the call for general education reform has stemmed from pressure by educational organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U); however, employers have also embraced the need for change, with 93 percent of employers saying the abilities to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems are more important than a student’s major (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Higher education institutes and employers refer to this need for breadth (general education) and depth (major) as the “T-shaped individual,” (see p. 28). Academia, industry, government, and others now are pushing this model, even forming a new conference called the “T-Summit” that first began in 2014 to bring those stakeholders together (Michigan State University Office of the Provost, 2015).

With these internal and external pressures to reform general education, Virginia Tech’s 2012-18 Strategic Plan, “A Plan for a New Horizon,” called for the university to “evaluate and modify the current Curriculum for Liberal Education to embrace alternate pathways to a general education” (p. 14). Following inclusion in the strategic plan, the work to plan a new curriculum amplified. In April 2015, university governance approved a new curriculum, “Pathways to General Education.” In April 2016, university governance approved an implementation plan for the curriculum, which details how the curriculum will be phased in to replace the Curriculum for

Liberal Education. The university will implement the new curriculum for new students in the second summer session of 2018.

Now that the curriculum and implementation plan are both approved, the Pathways to General Education administrative team is anticipating the need for a public relations and marketing plan to make sure stakeholders are aware of the process through which the new courses, minors, and curricular components will be developed, approved, and offered to Virginia Tech students. Communication will need to be targeted to a range of audiences, including students (current and prospective), faculty, advisors, and others to clarify the implementation process, including requirements, transition details, resources, and expectations. As a major change that touches most of the university community in some way, there is a need for a strategic and clear approach to communication to avoid confusion while also highlighting the benefits of the new curriculum.

Research into change management and change communication may provide some guidance in an approach to take for this task; however, a majority of the literature, as I will review later, is within organizations with a clear top-down hierarchy. A university as an organization is much different than organizations with a top-down power structure, with unique cultures that impact how change filters through institutions. While research in change management, change communication, and change in higher education mentions the importance of communication to help guide change, the literature does not speak to the role of external communication and public relations during a major change in higher education, such as the implementation of a new general education curriculum.

My thesis helps fill that gap, expanding knowledge in how public relations can be used to supplement plans for change within higher education organizations. In recent years, some of Virginia Tech's peer institutions have revised and implemented new general education curricula. Using a grounded theory approach, I performed a comparative case study on three peer institutions that have implemented new general education curricula within the last 5 to 10 years. The purpose of the case study approach is to learn what communications and public relations practices were successful or troublesome during the revision through the first year of implementation. To evaluate the process at each institution, I interviewed two to five individuals who were in leadership roles during the revision and implementation process at that institution and analyzed any communications materials (brochures, flyers, governance documents, websites,

etc.) related to the implementation. Because grounded theory calls for the researcher to collect rich data, look for themes, and use comparative analysis to build theory instead of mapping data to an existing theory (Charmaz, 2014), I approached each case study with no preconceived ideas about communication's role in the implementation of a major change in higher education. Some key themes rose to prominence from the data. Leadership and engagement were critical in the change process. Strong leadership was important; however, the revision needed to be faculty-driven with broad representation of campus groups. In regard to communication strategy, key themes emerged from the data such as communicating face-to-face, celebrating unique elements of the curriculum, targeting communication to specific audiences, being transparent, and selling the curriculum's relevancy. The results reflected research on change management, although adapted within the context of specific challenges posed by the higher education organizational environment.

In the next chapter, I will review relevant literature including change management, change communication, change in higher education, and general education reform. In the following chapter, I will detail grounded theory and how I applied it to this study, which uses a case study approach on three peer institutions. The fourth chapter will review my results, including the themes that emerged among the institutions. The fifth chapter will be a discussion of the impact of the results, including its contribution to change management research within the context of a higher education organizational structure. The sixth chapter will address the study's limitations and opportunities for further research. Finally, I will detail recommendations that may advise other higher education institutions preparing for a significant curricular change.

Literature Review

Research into change, specifically change management is plentiful. In a large majority of the research, profit-driven businesses are the targeted organizations and most often, they are private businesses and corporations. Among the various topics within change management, communications and public relations makes up a significant component of change management research, because communications and public relations is recognized as a major contributor to successful planned implementations of change within organizations. However, higher education institutions are very different from typical businesses. Thus, their organizational structure is important to understand, especially when considering the implementation of change within the structure.

Change Management

“Change is good,” is a mantra often heard. While some may look forward to a fresh start, for many, change can bring anxiety and fear related to both personal and professional changes. Frequently, change is necessary, particularly for organizations to survive and be competitive. While change in organizations is not new, it became a focus for research over the last few decades, particularly change in businesses, developing into the field of change management. Research in the field can help guide the change process, and in theory, make it smoother for all involved.

Nadler (1981) looked into the structure of organizations, accounting for its members, resources, functions, and other factors to explore why change can be problematic to start and implement. He found change presents three main problems: resistance, control, and power. Nadler concluded that resistance could be overcome by providing motivation to change, particularly using data to show stakeholders why the status quo will no longer work. In addition, negative feelings within the organization stemming from control and power can be mitigated through effective management, allowing stakeholders some degree of participation in the change and rewarding those who help with the transition.

Shore and Kupferberg (2014) elaborated on the resistance that Nadler identified as part of the change process. Using a health perspective, Shore and Kupferberg compared an organization to patients who must change habits to be healthier. Organizations need to change

for the health of the company. They argue resistance will happen, but suggest ways to overcome it. “If you are deep into a transformational change initiative and are not facing resistance, you should see a red flag. The trick is to avoid framing the proposed change in ways that stifle debate or preclude any dissent. Instead, change leaders must anticipate the level of resistance, welcome critical discussion and then seek ways to bring their organization beyond the Valley of Doubt” (p. 279).

Other researchers sought to build models to outline change processes, in an attempt to equip leaders and managers in guiding their desired change within their scope of responsibility. The intent is for leaders to apply the models to their individualized situation to achieve the goal they set for change. Two influential change management models include Kotter (1996) and Krüger (2010).

Kotter (1996) argued that one of the main errors during a change process is “undercommunicating the vision by a factor of 10 (or 100 or even 1,000)” (p. 9). He established an eight-stage process of creating major change including, a) establishing a sense of urgency; b) creating the guiding coalition (a group with enough power to lead but still work as a team); c) developing a vision and strategy; d) communicating the change vision (using every possible medium and having a group model the new change); e) empowering broad-based action (get rid of obstacles, encourage risk-taking and non-traditional behavior to achieve goals); f) generating short-term wins (and recognizing them publicly); g) consolidating gains and producing more change; and h) anchoring new approaches in the culture. Kotter argues that failure in the first three steps can lead to problems with communication and individuals saying they were not aware of the impending change.

The Krüger Model of Change Management (2010) takes a different approach to look at change than Kotter (1996). Instead of a specific process to follow to get a desired change, Krüger created a visual guide that represents change as an iceberg – where most of the danger and potential resistance to change is actually below the ice.

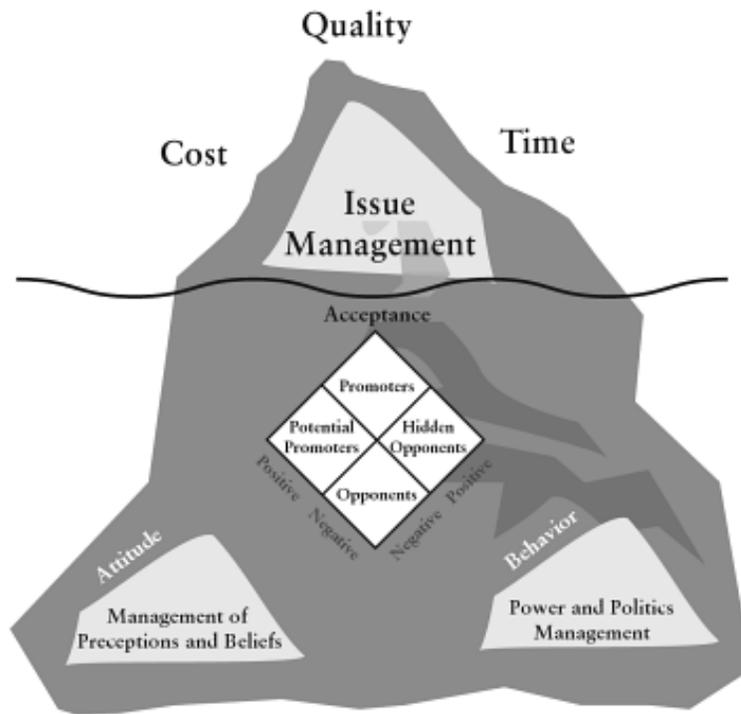


Figure 1. Krüger Model of Change Management (Boller, 2015).

Krüger argues that organizations often look at change as issues management – the things above the water that can be easily identified such as financial resources and time to implement the change. But, there are much larger issues below the surface that need to be addressed, including human resources, power structures, and perceptions and beliefs. Krüger argues that for real change to occur, change agents have to take into account the bottom of the iceberg within an organization.

Further research expanded on the change management issues that Krüger identified as the bottom of the iceberg – issues that are not obvious factors to consider during change, but are important for a cohesive and smooth change process. The context of an organization, including its history, internal and external influencers, government, technological changes, culture, and other factors can play a role in change efforts. Walker, Armenakis, and Bernerth (2007) looked at how the context of the organization and individual differences among employees can impact change initiatives within organizations. They recommended investigation of prior planned change efforts at the organization to plan for potential pitfalls, based on that history. In addition, change agents should allow an opportunity for employee feedback regarding the proposed change instead of one-way (top-down) communication of the planned change.

Employee engagement also emerged as an important factor in change within Jian's (2007) research. Jian analyzed a Midwestern United States company that recently acquired new companies and decided to reduce costs and restructure some support services. Through observations, interviews, and analyzing documents, the author found several gaps that led to negative employee feelings about the changes taking place. In particular, he argues that both managers and employees need to be viewed as potential change agents, or individuals who advocate and help facilitate for a desired change. Using employees as integral members of the change management team (instead of just hoping they adapt without complaint) can guide future planned change models.

Change Communication

Many of the leading change management models (Nadler, 1981; Kotter, 1996; Krüger, 2010) identify communication as a major part of the change process that can either make or break a successful transition. Kotter (1996) even devotes a chapter of his book solely to communication, advocating the use of public relations tactics to enable the change process. He recommends keeping communication simple; repeating the message often; creating opportunities to make ideas come to life through metaphors, analogies, storytelling, and visual media; holding multiple forums; allowing a two-way dialogue; leading by example; and explaining any things that seem inconsistent (1996).

Some researchers have argued that a failure to change likely centers around communication problems specifically. Lewis and Seibold (1998) detailed the depth of research in organizational change implementation and the impact of communication on successful or failed implementations. The authors outline six major areas of research including, a) general approaches to implementation, such as if the approach is based on rules or is more free-flowing or political in nature, among others; b) strategies and tactics for change implementation; c) change agents; d) contingencies that affect implementation; e) strategic planning and implementation; and f) themes and recommendations from the literature. Later, Lewis (2000) performed case studies on four organizations that were implementing quality check programs. Among the companies, Lewis noted four themes that stemmed from issues with communication during the implementation that hindered the change processes including difficulty creating and communicating vision; not understanding the purpose of change and difficulty relaying that to

leadership; proving the legitimacy of the change; and communicating goal achievements. Each of these themes links back to steps in Kotter's (1996) change process, which outlines ways to communicate vision and the purpose of change while also celebrating short-term gains during the change process. In addition, it links to Krüger's (2010) representation of change management where things like attitudes and behaviors that can impede change are difficult to manage and are often not clearly visible to those pushing for change.

Noting many books in the popular press related to coping with and leading change, Lewis, Schmisser, Stephens, and Weir (2006) analyzed 24 books from the top 100 best-selling books on organizational change from Amazon.com that focused on communication issues during change implementation. Themes emerged from their analysis including the importance of change agents, who "promote communication and participation, facilitate the process for change, and create a vision" (p. 118). In addition, they found general strategies for communication and introduction of change including emphasizing participation and empowerment; creating a change culture where adaptation is the norm; emphasizing purpose and vision, justifying the change; and emphasizing communication by utilizing as many media as possible to communicate about the change, especially face-to-face interaction. The authors also noted communication tactics that permeated the popular books, and identified seven major themes including, asking for input; using informal networks and knowledge of key stakeholders; disseminating information; managing the style and content of communication; being motivational in communication; formulating and following a communication plan; creating and communicating vision; and using threats, punishments, and intimidation (a less popular theme than others).

While much of the research thus far has looked at change management and communication in public organizations, Riley (2005) evaluated change management in public sector organizations. Riley analyzed interviews and focus group studies involving 12 public sector organizations that occurred in the late 1990's. She found participants said the change effort was harder than anticipated. For managers, three major challenges involved communication – change was hard to envision, managers had difficulty saying the right thing about the change, and they had difficulty getting employees to buy into the changes. For employees, communication was also a problem, citing not enough information or vague information about the change and opportunities for them to provide feedback about the change.

Public relations and change communication. While much of the research previously discussed showcases communication as both a potential problem but also a potential mediator in the process of change, other research has focused on the actual communication itself – including the audiences, media, tactics, and stakeholders – from a public relations perspective. Often the public relations efforts will be internally focused (primarily within the organization) instead of to an external audience, but similar public relations strategies and tactics are used to achieve change goals.

As an organization begins to prepare for change, some look to public relations agencies and professionals for assistance. Lies (2011) analyzed the amount of time some public relations agencies dedicated to change management communication. Lies surveyed 60 PR agencies in German-speaking countries during summer 2010 and found that more than half performed change communication responsibilities at least 20 percent of the time, with a quarter saying it accounted for up to 50 percent or more of their jobs. Agencies varied in the role filled for change communication projects, with under half saying they lead the strategic change process frequently or very frequently, but almost three quarters saying they provide operational support (events, media relations) frequently or very frequently.

While Lies (2011) looked at hiring outside public relations agencies during a change management process, Dürig and Sriramesh (2004) saw how public relations professionals within organizations can also be utilized during the preparation and implementation of planned change. They examined a large utility company in Germany that acquired 100 mid-sized companies and, thus, had to restructure and re-envision the corporation as a whole. Internal public relations staff from the main company and from those in the acquired companies put together a three-phase integrated marketing and communication plan. The researchers found the process of building a plan together – constructing a corporate identity and communications strategy – was important in the change process. In addition, the authors noted that having communication measures run parallel to each other, not one after the other, and targeting communications messages to the individual stakeholder were successful methods.

Utilizing public relations professionals – either through an external agency (Lies, 2011) or with internal professionals (Dürig & Sriramesh, 2004) – is one way for organizations to manage change processes. PR strategies and tactics can help tailor change messaging to specific stakeholders to help moderate the desired change.

Internal communication. As public relations professionals focus their efforts on change, a major audience will be internal; as often is the case within an organization, internal communication is mainly targeted to employees. Multiple studies have looked at issues that arise and some tactics to mitigate change when the primary audience is internal.

Barrett (2002) created the Strategic Employee Communication Model, a way to visualize some of the recommendations from research on internal communication strategies during change. The author used the model in a case study, looking at a major change program that was implemented during a large corporate merger. While public relations professionals may lead communication efforts, the model spreads responsibility for communication across the organization for more open conversations throughout the organization. Barrett's model creates a communication team made up of staff and mid to upper-level management that creates targeted messages based on strategic objectives for the company. The team then spreads those targeted messages in a variety of ways, depending on their roles, including face-to-face communication (forums, meetings, etc.), electronic, and print communications. During the case study, employee morale increased when there were more open conversations in the variety of channels. In addition, more managers accepted responsibility for communication, instead of only shifting it to the public relations office or president.

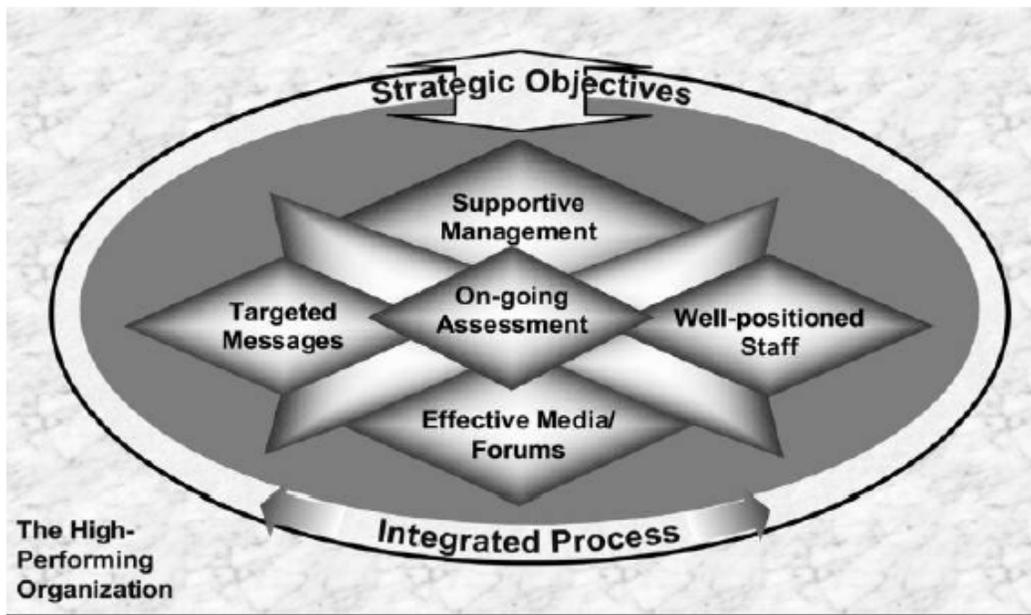


Figure 2. Strategic employee communication model (Barrett, 2002).

Finney and Scherrebeck-Hansen (2010) primarily looked at obstacles that hinder an internal communications plan, analyzing a rebranding campaign at a Canadian university. The authors suggest with a large-scale change effort like a rebranding campaign, it is important to address issues such as power, control, and resistance (similar to the ideas proposed by Nadler, 1981) within the internal marketing plan that will help stakeholders accept the organization's proposed change.

Building on ways to overcome obstacles, Klein (1996), Linke and Zerfass (2011), and Torppa and Smith (2011) outlined guidelines for management to better communicate changes with employees and increase buy-in. Klein (1996) recommends celebrating successes during the implementation of change and allowing opportunities for feedback and correction of problems, so employees feel engaged in the process and develop a sense of ownership, which will hinder the spread of rumors or negative opinions. Linke and Zerfass (2011) found internal communication needs to be targeted to the level of involvement of the employee as well as a mix of a variety of communication tactics and strategies to reach the widest audience to encourage their awareness, understanding, acceptance, and action. Torppa and Smith (2011) evaluated the internal communication plan at a large-scale, public sector organization that was undergoing significant changes to restructure positions and reallocate resources due to funding cuts. Communication strategies and tactics included organizational newsletters, the website, meetings with supervisors, a strategic plan, video updates from the director and other members of leadership, an advisory committee, organizational conferences, and a day-long meeting that all personnel were invited to attend. Researchers surveyed employees following the all-day meeting and found that employees who believed the change was needed, well-designed, and achievable to implement, while also supported by their supervisors and beneficial to the individual employees were most likely to support the change and help make it a success.

Public relations strategies can be targeted to internal groups within organizations to ease change, particularly when focused on changes that will impact employees. Overall, research (Barrett, 2002; Klein, 1996; Linke & Zerfass, 2011; Torppa & Smith, 2011) has found open lines of two-way communication (though meetings or other avenues that allow employees to provide feedback to leadership) and transparency in the change process help reduce resistance to change.

Public relations leadership. While public relations tactics and strategies are important during the change process, public relations professionals can also impact change efforts through

leadership. As a public relations professional, individuals are expected to provide vision (Choi & Choi, 2009). Luo and Jiang (2014) found both serving as a leader and also advising and influencing middle and upper management was part of a public relations professional's role during change. The researchers performed interviews with upper management, middle management, and frontline employees at three multinational companies in China that had recently undergone a substantial change. They found public relations provided multiple roles including: training on managing employee emotions; training on communication to middle management; resolving conflict between middle and top management; reinforcing and communicating shared visions; counseling communication styles of top management; challenging the decisions of top management; and advising about leadership about potential threats that may occur with the change.

In addition to building a communications plan and implementing the strategies and tactics laid out in the plan, public relations professionals can influence change within an organization through a leadership role, particularly through counseling and training members of leadership (Choi & Choi, 2009; Luo and Jiang 2014).

Change in Higher Education

Much of the research on change in organizations focuses on corporations, businesses, and organizations that have a hierarchal structure. Higher education, however, has key differences from those groups that impact the implementation of major changes, mainly its culture and structure. Tierney (1988, 2008) said a culture could be analyzed based on the institution's environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. "An understanding of culture has become essential for those who seek to understand how to foment change in the organization. Higher education is undergoing as significant a period of turbulence and innovation as at any time in the last 50 years. The status quo is no longer tenable, and of consequence, individuals have tried to figure out what might enable the campus to move forward rather than remain wedded to the norm" (Tierney, 2008, p. 3). Tierney emphasizes that communication, particularly in the realm of shared governance, is vital to implement change within higher education institutions. He doesn't focus on specific tactics, pointing out that the types of media we communicate through regularly are in flux; rather, he notes that faculty or administrators,

who believe a proposed change does not have transparency and or opportunities for feedback, may hinder the change within the governance structure.

Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) expanded on the idea of higher education's distinctive culture and structure, identifying six unique cultures in the academy: collegial (faculty and disciplines take priority with a focus on scholarship and research); managerial (focused on the organization itself, how it is run and how it is assessed); developmental (focuses on the maturation and professional development of all those within its community); advocacy (a balance of power among all those who contribute to the institution); virtual (more fluid organizational structure that operates with a global perspective and learning network); and tangible (grounded in traditions and learning from its community). The identification of these six cultures allows change agents to interpret where their institution falls culturally so that can be a consideration as they map out a plan to implement a desired change.

Kezar (2013) looks at change in higher education building on the work of Tierney (2008) and Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) with a macro framework, looking at the cultures of the academy, its key characteristics, and how it all impacts the process of change. She notes that higher education institutions have exclusive features that must be taken into account in order to influence change including, the unique culture of the academy (including the presence of tenured faculty), shared governance, multiple power and authority structures, and institutional status (private versus public institutions and what that means from a funding perspective), among others (2001). Kezar (2013) argues that because of higher education's organizational structure, a top-down, one-process approach to change will fail. Instead, she discusses that change should occur from many points in the organization with different approaches used simultaneously to achieve the desired change. In addition, she highlights that external and organizational context related to the desired change cannot be ignored. "Deciding which changes are necessary requires careful consideration of the campus history, culture, mission, and strategic opportunities" (p. 18).

Kezar (2013) creates a change macro-framework that takes into account the type of change (content, scope, levels, focus, forces of change); context for change (social, political and economic factors; external stakeholders; higher education as an institution; institutional culture); agency/leadership (top-down versus bottom-up; collective leadership; shared leadership); and approach to change (scientific management, evolutionary, political, social cognition, cultural, and institutional).

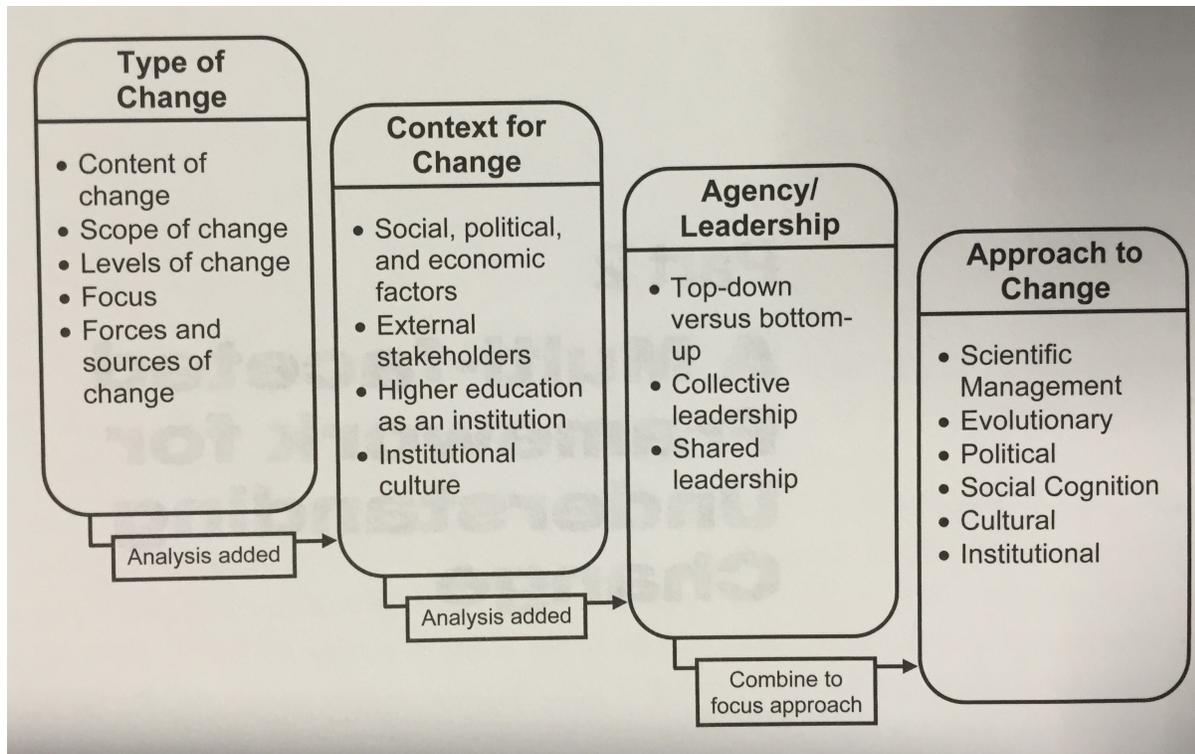


Figure 3. Change macro framework (Kezar, 2013. p. 44).

Kezar (2013) notes that secondary change, or deep transformative change, is difficult to achieve. “The change process described is so substantial that it alters the operating systems, underlying values, and culture of an organization or system” (p. 62). How do you know second-order change has occurred?

The first is attitudinal or cultural evidence. This can include changes in the way groups or individuals interact with one another, the language used by the campus in referring to itself, or the types of conversations that occur, as well as the abandonment of old arguments or emergence of new relationships with stakeholders. A second indicator is the presence of structural elements. In higher education institutions, these might include substantial changes to the curriculum, new pedagogies, changes in student learning and assessment practices, new policies, the reallocation of funds, the creation of new departments or institutional structures, and new processes or structures for decision-making. Yet, the defining feature of second-order change is the attitudinal change that is simultaneously manifested in an organization’s structures. A change in structures alone is usually not an indicator of second-order change (p. 63).

Kezar argues second-order change requires sensemaking – where members of an institution take an idea on as a priority or commitment, and “change their mindset” through social interactions (p. 64). Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) define sensemaking as an opportunity when individuals in an organization are able to define a situation in words that prompts action on their part to impart change. In addition to sensemaking, organization learning – a more data-driven approach to promoting change – is also required for second-order change (Kezar, 2013).

Kezar and Eckel (2003) looked at change strategies in this broader framework, researching institutions trying to implement transformational change, which they defined as a change that affects “institutional cultures, as deep and pervasive, as intentional, and as occurring over time” (p. 27). Their book is based on an ACE Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation study that involved 23 colleges and universities. They noted, “although leadership from senior administrators is important, alone it is insufficient” (p. 5). The researchers found five core strategies common to institutions with successful transformations (these were built using Berquist & Pawlak and Tierney’s models together as a guide): a) senior administrative support, b) collaborative leadership, c) flexible vision, d) staff development, and e) visible action. They also briefly noted that among institutions, extensive communication was key to their efforts, with well-developed internal communication plans as a strategy, with multiple channels to communicate including campus newspapers, meetings, newsletters, websites, retreats, speakers, and more. They also note the each institution has its own unique culture, which must be considered to guide change efforts. Holley (2009) used Eckel and Kezar’s (2003) transformational change model to do a case study on 21 research institutions implementing large-scale changes to build interdisciplinary knowledge and activities. The author confirmed Eckel and Kezar’s (2003) model, finding senior administrative support, collaborative leadership, flexible vision, faculty and staff development, and visible action were key to successful implementation of interdisciplinary initiatives as research universities.

Meanwhile, there is some disagreement in many institutions, because of its unique shared governance structure, on which group is responsible for driving change. A 2013 “Innovation” survey performed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and Adobe found both presidents and faculty believe faculty should be the drivers of change, but presidents do not think faculty step up to this role. Both groups agreed that politicians and business leaders too often drove the push

for innovation. Both presidents and faculty also agreed that change should focus on teaching and learning, but too often instead focuses on technology and cutting costs (Selingo, 2013).

Beyond “who” is leading change at higher education institutions, in a survey of key decision-makers at 26 European universities, researchers asked which factors bring about strategic change in higher education (Stensaker, Frølich, Huisman, Waagene, Scordato, and Pimentel Bótas, 2014). Overall, respondents indicated that leadership (77 percent), communication (56 percent), cooperation with academics (54 percent), an emphasis on decision-making procedures (51 percent), and a supportive financial climate (50 percent) rated as extremely or very important to strategic change. When asked which factors are more important to change today versus five or ten years ago, communication (73 percent) rose to the top, with leadership (71 percent) and decision making procedures (69 percent) also emphasized. Respondents also said it was important to note the development of a shared culture and the values and norms of the organization. There was variance among the types of universities, with different factors more important for research-intensive universities versus technical/specialist universities, indicating that the structure of the organization may impact the perception of what guides strategic change.

As changes are implemented, the unique organizational structure of higher education institutions, in particular the faculty structure with tenured and non-tenure members, can cause differences in impressions and emotions during change. During a departmental merger at a university, those impacted either viewed the merger as an opportunity, a threat, or inevitable. Those who viewed it as an opportunity were largely older men with tenure. The other two groups were younger, untenured faculty or staff (Dasborough, Lamb, & Suseno, 2015).

Strategic plans. A major opportunity for change within higher education is when an institution develops a strategic plan. Accreditors, legislators, professional organizations, and those within an institution all play a role in determining what goes into a university’s strategic plan. Rowley and Sherman (2004) looked at the difficulty some universities have in developing and implementing strategic plans, a document that sets the tone and priorities for change at a college or university. They say higher education used to be the incubator of innovation, but now they are not the only source of good ideas and change. Students are now learners and consumers, which changes their relationship with the university. Rowley and Sherman note that a top-down approach to develop a plan does not work with the university’s dual governance structure.

Research institutions tend to have “high levels of administrative bureaucracy with highly unstructured faculty activities,” (p. 39). Meanwhile, Buller (2014) argued that strategic plans are not advisable for higher education institutions, mainly because of their unique organizational structure. He argues change is more likely to happen when it is based upon needs instead of desires or competition.

Push for General Education Reform

Over the past several decades, there has been a call to reform general education requirements in higher education, mainly lead by educational organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), which promotes quality liberal education in higher education institutions. The organization has released multiple publications, case studies, and meetings, that focus on the importance of liberal education, of which general education is a key component, to meet the academic expectations of an undergraduate degree while preparing students for varied educational and career paths following graduation.

In one of the AAC&U’s most recent reports, Paul Gaston (2015) argues that general education is pivotal to impacting all undergraduate students.

The single most direct and effective approach to improving the educational experience for all students is the redesign of general education as a platform for integrative, digitally rich, proficiency-based, and question-centered learning grounded in the humanities, arts, sciences, and social sciences. Rather than a buffet of survey courses to be ‘gotten out of the way,’ general education must become the integrative center for the most important learning outcomes—from the first year until the degree (Gaston, p. 5-6).

With that concept in mind, the AAC&U has called for many higher education institutions to reform their general education curricula to focus on learning outcomes while also distributing the courses throughout the entire undergraduate path of study, instead of just in the first two years, while also integrating some outcomes with the plan of study for majors and minors.

The AAC&U began recommending general education curriculum reform more than three decades ago; however, within the past decade, more contemporary reform came to prominence, in part due to the influx of more students into higher education. In 2002, the organization released “Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College,” that called for “a dramatic reorganization of undergraduate education to ensure that all college

aspirants receive not just access to college, but an education of lasting value” (vii). Over the next few years, the AAC&U released additional reports calling for reform. In 2009, Hart Research Associates released a report, after surveying AAC&U institutions, that found 59 percent of schools had increased their focus on general education, with 89 percent in some stage of assessing or modifying their general education program (2009).

The process to evaluate, revise, and implement a new general education curriculum is a major organizational change. “General education change is not just a task of curricular change: it is also cultural change” (Awbrey, 2005, p. 4). Awbrey looks at general education reform with Schein’s Model of Organization Culture, which centers on artifacts, values and beliefs, and basic assumptions (Schein, 1985). Awbrey aligns artifacts with the structure of a curriculum, values and beliefs with the model used for general education, and basic assumptions with what an institution believes to be the “core” knowledge every educated person should have. In addition, Awbrey notes that resistance is common and part of the organizational change process.

“Structural change and cultural change are not separate, but are two parts of a whole,” (p. 17).

Meanwhile, accrediting bodies also monitor a college or university’s ability to deliver general education to its students. For Virginia Tech, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) both offer restraints and recommendations regarding general education that the school has to consider in addition to pressure from external agencies like AAC&U. SCHEV, in particular, looks at core competency areas in regards to assessment. The Assessment of Student Learning includes evaluating students’ competencies in six areas: critical thinking, information technology literacy, oral communication, quantitative reasoning, scientific reasoning, and written communication (SCHEV, 2010). Beyond competencies at individual institutions, SCHEV is concerned with how credits earned at the state’s community colleges map and transfer to four-year state institutions as general education credit.

In order to achieve accreditation with SACSCOC, the university must meet a broad range of standards. Principle 2.7.3 requires every undergraduate degree program have a general education component that “(1) is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree, (2) ensures breadth of knowledge, and (3) is based on a coherent rationale,” (SASCOC, 2012). The commission requires at least 30 credit hours of general education for bachelor’s degree programs with at least one course from each of these areas: humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences,

and natural science/mathematics (SASCOC, 2012). These regulatory agencies create requirements to have general education within limitations, adding complexity for institutions that wish to revise their current curricular framework.

On top of these accrediting bodies that apply to the entire university, some disciplines have their own external accreditation requirements. For example, Virginia Tech's College of Engineering must adhere to standards set forth by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), while the Pamplin College of Business must follow guidelines from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). These additional accreditation requirements add complexity to the revision of general education and programmatic curricular requirements for these degrees.

For students and faculty, the relevance of general education is sometimes called into question. Students (and their families who may foot part or all of the tuition bill) may not understand why they are required to take general education courses that delay them from the in-major courses. Faculty may also believe general education places limitations on discipline-specific courses, and some may seek to avoid teaching general education classes (Fuess & Mitchell, 2001). To make general education more relevant to students and faculty, the reform process, such as one that took place at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2005, often begins with this question: "What should all undergraduate students—irrespective of their majors and career aspirations—know or be able to do upon graduation?" (Fuess & Mitchell, 2001, p. 5). The question helped provide relevancy to the curriculum and keep the reform process focused on the future, instead of debating the advantages and drawbacks of the old curriculum (Fuess & Mitchell, 2001).

With the reform process at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, transparency through the reform process was key to getting buy-in and encouraging departments to align with university strategic goals and mission (Fuess & Mitchell, 2001; Kean et al., 2008). By making the curriculum simpler, it became easier to understand how general education fit and complemented a major or discipline (Fuess & Mitchell, 2001). In addition, Fuess & Mitchell (2001) argue that this transparency and an active intention to engage with multiple stakeholders throughout the process was critical to the successful implementation of a new general education curriculum at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Kean, Mitchell, and Wilson, (2008) also analyzed the University of Nebraska-Lincoln during its curricular reform. They also found transparency

during the process was critical, using the web as one medium to keep stakeholders aware of the process as well as events and meetings to communicate face-to-face. Communication with students was also vital so they better understood the “why” of general education, which was addressed in large part through clearer alignment on course syllabi.

The University of North Dakota also went through a revision of its general education curriculum, with the key years of revision happening between 2005-2007. The book, *A Process Approach to General Education Reform* (Gano-Phillips and Barnett, 2010) includes a chapter devoted to how clear and transparent communication with a variety of stakeholders on campus (faculty, departments, students) was critical to the reform process. A few things set the stage for reform including, first, a large study on students’ impressions of general education, which was mainly described as “hoop jumping: they sought to get through the courses as quickly as possible in order to ‘check off the requirements and get them out of the way’” (p. 129); second, a general education curriculum review committee saw issues when undertaking a course recertification process where courses did not align with general education learning objectives; and third, an accrediting body noted issues with the lack of assessment for courses to showcase how the university knows students learned what the university wanted them to learn. The concerns spearheaded the reform process though communication was critical, through meetings, presentations, documentation, retreats, and more kept up transparency and a variety of voices and input throughout leading up to a successful implementation.

Beyond just the internal audience during implementation, other stakeholders are important during and after the change process. In the AAC&U report, *Greater Expectations* (Schneider, 2002), the national panel outlines that in recent years, the expectations for what students should get from a college education varies by audience. For instance, students and their families may perceive college as a gateway to a good job, while the government sees college as an economic stimulus, while faculty see it as an opportunity to learn depth in a discipline and breadth across varied disciplines. Each audience has a different priority. Schneider calls for a new national commitment to provide an excellent liberal education to all students, not just those attending elite institutions and not just those studying traditional arts and sciences disciplines. Professional studies—such as business, education, health sciences, and technologies—should also be approached as liberal education (*Greater Expectations*, p. xii)

Employers. Beyond higher education institutions and associations, faculty, students, and their families, employers are also becoming more vocal about the need for graduates that are well rounded, not just trained in a discipline. Hart Research Associates has performed multiple studies for the AAC&U, looking at the issue of employability. In a 2013 report, they found 93 percent of employers said the ability to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than a student’s major (Hart Research Associates, 2013). In a 2015 report, much of what they learned two years earlier was confirmed; down just slightly, 91 percent of employers said the ability to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than the student’s major. Students largely agreed with employers on the value of skills like communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving (Hart Research Associates, 2013 and 2015).

In recent years, the focus on a person’s breadth of skills and knowledge and depth of skills and knowledge has been called the “T-shaped individual” or “T-shaped professional.”

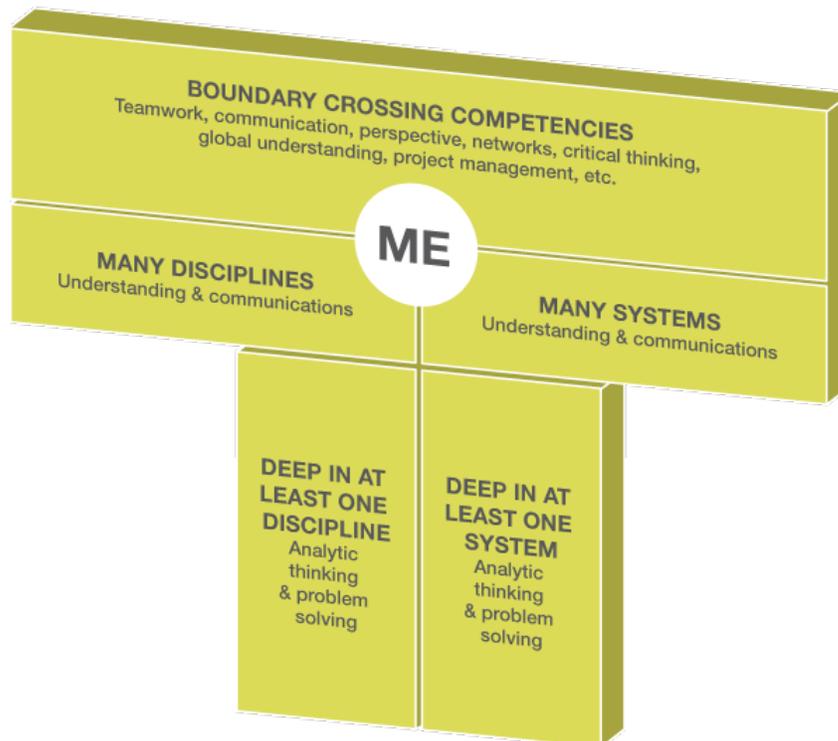


Figure 4. The “T.” (Michigan State University Office of the Provost, 2015).

The figure showcases two vertical bars that represent a person's depth of knowledge in at least one discipline and one system. The top horizontal bars represent a person's understanding of many disciplines and systems as well as crosscutting skills like teamwork, communication, management, and others (Michigan State University Office of the Provost, 2015). The top bars are often connected to general education, while the vertical bars are connected to a student's major. Talk of the t-shaped professional has stirred up interest, and in 2014, leaders from higher education institutes, industry, government, professional organizations, and other interested groups came together for the T-Summit, which has occurred annually since the 2014 inaugural conference. The summit focuses on how all of those stakeholders can help develop individuals develop those t-shaped competencies in school, to lead to better employees and citizens.

As organizations like the AAC&U advocated for institutions to revitalize their general education curriculum (Fuess & Mitchell, 2001; Gaston, 2015; AAC&U, n.d.; Gano-Phillips & Barnett, 2010), universities began to evaluate the need for well-rounded students, not only for their academic capabilities, but also their employability (Hart Research Associates, 2013 and 2015; Michigan State University Office of the Provost, 2015). Over the past couple of decades, colleges and universities have begun to revamp their curricula to meet the recommendations.

As mentioned earlier, Virginia Tech evaluated its current general education curriculum over the last decade, seeing that it was not meeting the expectations of students and the needs of industry as students graduated and moved onto careers. Coupled with the internal review, the university saw the call for change from external agencies like the AAC&U, prompting university leadership to formalize the need to revise the current curriculum. As the curriculum and implementation plans came into fruition, leadership identified a need for a communications plan to support the change process.

Research Questions

While there has been research on change management and communication, much of it has been focused on a corporate, business environment. As research into higher education organizations shows, colleges and universities operate much differently than a classic business. Even research into change in higher education institutions shows that different approaches must be taken in order to successfully implement a change. However, while research into change in higher education does sometimes emphasize the importance of "communication" there is not

much research specifically about the role of public relations communications during a major change at a university.

Grounded theory, which will be fully explored in the next chapter, offers an opportunity to explore this area through a case study approach, looking at universities that have recently (in the past 5-10 years) introduced, passed, and implemented a new general education curriculum on campus and the role of communication and public relations tactics during the acceptance and implementation period. With this in mind, the following research questions were formed:

RQ1: How did universities implementing a new general education curriculum communicate the changes with their various audiences (faculty, staff, current students, prospective students, accrediting bodies, etc.)?

RQ2: What tactics were most successful in communicating the curricular changes?

RQ3: What media were most effective in reaching the targeted audiences?

While my project is centered around the implementation of a major curricular change on several college campuses, I also hope to learn more broadly about the role of communication during a major change in higher education that may be generalized to other cases of change. I hope to connect the research fields of change management and higher education organization to build a list of recommendations for higher education institutions considering a major curricular change.

Method

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory developed as a method of research beginning with Glaser and Strauss (1967) and has since developed into a major methodological approach for both qualitative and quantitative research, though a majority of studies that use the approach are qualitative in nature (Charmaz, 2014). The basic idea of grounded theory is that social researchers collect data and discover theory through that data – instead of selecting a theory, collecting data, and analyzing the data against the chosen theory. “Grounded theory can guide you; it gives you focus and flexibility. ... Grounded theory can give you flexible guidelines rather than rigid prescriptions. With flexible guidelines, you direct your study but let your imagination flow” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 3 and 26).

Glaser and Strauss (1967, 2009) emphasize the importance of comparison analysis within the grounded theory approach – constantly comparing pieces of data to other pieces of data, noting similarities and differences and why they are happening. The comparison process happens as the data is being collected, not just at the end of the collection process. This constant comparison eventually leads the researcher to themes in the data, which can then inform the development of theory. “Grounded theory leads us to attend to what we hear, see, and sense while we are gathering data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 3). Corbin & Strauss emphasized that through the comparative process, researchers both collect data and analyze it simultaneously (1990). During data collection, researchers develop categories within each data set and then discover those same (or different) categories as they collect additional data. Researchers keep track of these categories and other notes about the data through memo writing, which happens at the same time or soon after data is collected (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Charmaz, 2014). Researchers continually develop and revise their theory during the data collection process, until they reach a saturation of data (not revealing any new information) to finalize their theory. Another key component to grounded theory is that the population is based on the theory the researchers hope to develop and is not intended to be a representative sample of a general population (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014).

The type of data collected for grounded theory can vary greatly, from interviews, documents, diaries, newspapers, letters, books, surveys, and more (Corbin & Strauss, 1990;

Charmaz, 2014). Researchers, however, emphasize that rich data – no matter what format a researcher decides to narrow their collection to – is key to the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). In addition, grounded theory was born as a tool for sociologists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), but has since evolved to a variety of fields in the humanities, business (Goulding, 2005), as well as health and science fields, among others (Charmaz, 2014).

Grounded theory offered a flexible approach to look at the research questions and has been used across many disciplines (Charmaz, 2014), including communication and higher education, which are at the root of my research questions. Extant research in change management, change communication, higher education as a unique organization, and change in higher education has looked at some of the elements that come into play during a major organizational change. However, the previous research does not directly target the role of public relations during the implementation of a major change at a university. Grounded theory provides a method to explore the experiences of campuses implementing a change to develop relevant and efficient public relations tactics to assist in the change effort.

The grounded theory method emphasizes a comparative approach to analyzing data (Glaser & Strauss, 2009), offering a structured and productive approach to explore these case studies. In this study, I analyze the communication efforts during the implementation of a new general education curriculum at three institutions. Through comparative analysis of the institutions' experiences, I can contribute best and worst communication practices during the implementation of a major university curricular change, identifying themes that emerged from all three institutions as well as differences between the universities.

In addition to adapting well to grounded theory research, case studies have a rich history in public relations research, both for academic researchers as well as practitioners. Pauly and Hutchinson looked at their use in the field and found “the profession of public relations understands itself through case studies,” (2001, p. 381). They see the benefit of case studies when the narrative puts public relations activities within varying levels of context that advance public relations as a communication practice. Stacks (2010) advocates for the use of two types of case studies within public relations research – historical, which looks at a program or plan in a linear fashion, or strategic, which focuses on strategy including what worked or did not work in a case. My method falls into the strategic form of case study. Michaelson and Stacks (2014) argue

the strategic approach is becoming more important for public relations practitioners as they are more often part of the leadership team within organizations, using strategy to inform decisions.

Justification of Cases

I evaluated three institutions in my comparative analysis. For the sake of confidentiality, I have coded the three institutions and will refer to them as Institution A, Institution B, and Institution C. All three schools are similar to Virginia Tech, with comparable undergraduate student populations around 25,000 in the mid-Atlantic and southeastern area of the United States. Each school is a member of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities and the Southern Universities Group. In addition, Institution A and Institution B are both Virginia Tech SCHEV-approved peer institutions.

Each of the institutions passed a new general education curriculum within the last seven years (the earliest in 2008), and implemented within the last three to six years. Each revision and implementation is recent enough, with implementation in the last five years, to give an adequate picture of the communications challenges and opportunities before, during, and after implementation through the first year of implementation.

Data Collection

In my research, I collected data primarily through interviews, with communications documents such as brochures, websites, news releases, and media coverage such as newspaper articles acting as supplemental data to either verify or disregard themes from the interviews. Interviews, in particular, are a good fit for grounded theory method because they are open-ended and permit “interviewers to discover discourses and to pursue ideas and issues immediately that emerge during the interview” (Charmaz, 2013). As the interview unfolds, the interviewer has flexibility to follow up and dig deeper for more information in the moment, to create a well-rounded data set.

Individuals were identified for interviews by researching governance documents related to the general education curriculum at each institution and reaching out to key individuals. After making an initial contact, individuals were asked to provide a snowball sample, identifying other people who were vital to the curriculum’s implementation and the communication and public

relations efforts surrounding it. In total, two to five individuals per university were identified through the snowball sample, contacted, and confirmed to participate in the research interviews.

Prior to scheduling interviews, I secured the approval of Virginia Tech's Institutional Review Board (IRB). In order to obtain their approval, I submitted multiple documents for their review including a recruitment letter to send to the individuals I have identified for interviews, a consent form for the interview subjects, a question bank to be used during the interviews, and a research protocol document. I obtained IRB approval on November 12, 2015.

In January 2016, I visited each campus in person for the interviews in order to build rapport with the interviewees and see the campus environment first-hand. In addition, each interviewee was asked to share relevant communications/public relations documents; therefore, performing the interviews in person made it easier to collect the documents, such as brochures and flyers that may be only available as a physical copy.

Following the interviews, I listened to the audio recordings of the interviews and wrote summary notes of what was discussed and any themes that emerged. I listened to the interviews a second time, this time transcribing some parts of the interviews that would help elaborate on themes that emerged. Then, I read through the supplemental communications materials provided by each institution, again noting themes and recurring ideas. While I looked for themes and recurring ideas, I compared the notes and results from the various interviews, seeing if the narratives from individuals at the same school concurred with each other or had dissonance, while also comparing their experience to the narratives at the other institutions, using grounded theory's constant comparative analysis as a guide.

Results

General education reform is rarely easy or predictable. While all three institutions created and implemented a new general education curriculum, the feeling of accomplishment varied depending on how the process unfolded. Institution A previously attempted to revise the curriculum, but failed after not getting support for the proposed revisions. When leadership decided to attempt a second revision, the university knew it needed to engage more faculty members in order to be successful. The second revision was faculty-driven and made it through governance successfully. Institution C studied the revision process at other institutions and saw the importance of administration and faculty teamwork to push revisions through governance channels, using teamwork to revise and implement a new curriculum. Institution B achieved approval of a new curriculum on paper, but the revision and implementation process was problematic resulting in a lack of students and faculty who take advantage of the innovative elements of the curriculum.

Two categories of themes emerged from the data. The first set of themes applies to the structure and make-up of the group(s) tasked with the development and implementation of a new curriculum. The organization of the group(s) had broad implications for a successful revision to the general education curricula and impacted how the revisions were communicated (or not communicated) across campus during implementation. These themes included strong administrative leadership communication, faculty-driven change as symbolic communication, and broad representation to build communication liaisons. The second set of themes applies to communication strategy, including best practices for engaging the campus community during and after the revision process. These themes included face-to-face communication; spotlighting unique curricular elements; targeting messages to specific audiences; transparency; and relevancy of the curricula.

Structure of the Revision/Implementation Team(s)

Leadership communication. At each of the institutions, administrative leadership prompted the official revision process. The president, provost, and/or their leadership team saw gaps in the current curricula that do not meet the needs of students, based on feedback from accrediting agencies, employers, students, or other audiences. They were also in tune with

prompts for revisions from higher education advocates such as the AAC&U. At each of the institutions I evaluated, administrative leaders began the revision process by calling for either the formation of a taskforce or charging existing curriculum committees to begin work to revise the institution's general education curriculum.

Beyond an initial charge to begin revision work, strong leadership – through their actions, communication, and allocations of resources – was vital to keeping the arduous task of a revision on track and implemented. “As far as the most important communication strategy, I think the president and provost have to talk about it,” said an administrator at Institution C. “One of the lessons learned is you need top down endorsement. The provost called for a new gen ed. ... There need to be some resources, maybe not a lot, but enough to say, not only does the provost insist on it, but there are also some resources. When the president and provost talk about the [the general education curriculum], they talk about those involved. That's putting resources behind it. That's saying leadership thinks this is important.”

Having high-level members of university leadership present throughout the progression, not just at the upper-level governance and implementation meetings, signified commitment to the process. “Having the higher-ups there, present when there was a potential issue on the lower committees, was helpful,” said an academic programs supervisor at Institution C. An advisor at the same institution echoed the importance of leadership involvement throughout the process. “It's got to come from the upper echelon while also getting down to brass tacks that here's how we can discuss [the revised curriculum] from an advising standpoint and student.”

Leadership was also noted as a centralizer of communication to keep the campus informed of revision and implementation progress. “The provost office took the lead,” said a faculty member at Institution C. “There was so much throughout the process coming from the provost office and they were keeping the website updated, sending out email blasts, organizing the faculty forums, communicating with the faculty and student newspapers. The provost office was really the central peg in all of that.”

Poor leadership communication, however, can lead to a strained revision and implementation that results in frustration and lack of support on campus. From interviews at Institution B, I found that while the school did pass a new curriculum, many of the faculty resent the changes, largely due to poor leadership during the revision. Members of the taskforce felt that leadership had a hidden agenda – a desire to cut credit hours to the program – that was

insinuated to the taskforce but was never broadly communicated to the university community. “They [leadership] presented [to the taskforce] a straw man that was simply the existing general education program with three fewer hours. . . . That was the leadership – there wasn’t one,” said a faculty member from Institution B who served on the taskforce. “The leadership fell apart. That made everyone mad and we took the heat because we had created this monster.” This mixed messaging caused distrust among faculty regarding the curriculum and, even after it passed, a desire for faculty to distance themselves from the curriculum, preventing them and students from participating in some of the more innovative elements of the revised general education program.

A decision by the provost to form a taskforce to oversee the revisions, instead of using an existing governance body may have caused some of the tension. “One thing that may have been problematic is that we have two undergraduate bodies that oversee the curriculum [names removed]. The provost did not pick either one of those groups to move this forward. There were certain things he wanted to accomplish and I don’t think he felt that those groups were going to move fast enough or in the direction he was hoping. Those groups were kind of bypassed for this other taskforce group,” said a college administrator who served on the taskforce.

Beyond those decisions, taskforce members felt leadership distanced themselves from the revision, leading the members to feel the blame for the changes. “The provost never gave us help. He may have sent an initial email saying we were going to start the gen ed review but particularly when things were going bad, we were doing what he wanted us to do, there was no support from him. The [taskforce] had to carry the bulk of the dissent,” said a college administrator. The provost’s lack of ongoing, supportive communication caused tension and an overall lack of engagement of faculty members with the revised curriculum, setting up problems throughout the revision and implementation process.

Faculty-driven change. Connected to the theme of leadership, the revisions that were seen as successful were primarily developed and implemented by faculty. This approach is important as symbolic and instrumental communication. It reaffirms faculty governance and the importance of faculty expertise in curricular matters. At Institutions A and C, leadership sought out faculty to lead to the process with the administration serving as partners to keep the process on track, through administrative support, communication, and allocation of resources. At Institution B, as we will see in the data, faculty were not heavily engaged in the process, which led to problematic responses to the revision, both in the development and implementation stages.

Institution A took this faculty-driven approach after a first attempt to revise the curriculum failed because of a lack of faculty involvement. “It [the second revision] was a joint effort between the provost office and the campus senate. ... Instead of the provost office saying we are going to do this and requiring the senate to pass it when they would say they have nothing to do with it. I think getting those two groups to work together and having a common charge was part of the motivation for this,” said an administrator from Institution A. “If faculty were going to complain, it was a product of their colleagues, not the administration.”

When Institution C began the formation of its committee charged with revising the curriculum, they found two hurdles to overcome – first, finding faculty willing to be involved in the revision, and second, making sure faculty felt empowered and engaged in the process. “Involving a lot of faculty was really key to us because nobody wanted to serve on these committees at first. It was like pulling teeth to get them on these specialty committees,” said an academic administrator. “Just helping them to understand the importance of what they were doing. This was a whole new name and direction.” This representation communicated the value and contribution of faculty who served in this role.

Beyond asking for faculty to be involved, it became important at Institution C to have faculty also be leaders in the revision. “As the committee formed, it didn’t take us long to get a sense of a little bit of pushback. People thought it was coming from the top down. Everyone is always suspicious of the administration no matter how good you are. So we thought it was a good idea to name a faculty co-chair,” said a college representative on the revision committee. “It just really lent credibility, it communicated the structure that you have co-people with this.” Leadership agreed that faculty engagement was critical. “There has to be a faculty member who is an advocate,” said an administrator. “There was me, but faculty has to hear it from someone who is tenure track. Someone has to care about it.”

Eventually, Institution C was able to engage a large number of faculty members in the process. “There was some where between 50 and 100 faculty involved just to answer some global questions about where is general education going for this university in the 21st century,” said a faculty member who served on the committee. “In the end, there was consensus on our committee about what we should do. I would say there was a reasonable consensus across campus, but you are never going to get 100 percent. But at least on the committee there was and the faculty senate process too validated it.”

Meanwhile, Institution B struggled to engage faculty on campus, stemming from the directives of leadership, as noted previously. “It isn’t just that we are doing it because we are doing it so get on board whether you like it or not. There has to be some passion. You have to get up there and preach, but you have to preach to more than just the converted,” said a faculty representative from Institution B.

“The faculty I think felt there was not enough consultation. ... When it came to the end they really were somewhat surprised and the provost curtailed some of the discussion. We should have mapped out the whole process, had some smaller deadlines, and worked through things in a more systematic ways. But we just didn’t do that,” said an associate dean at Institution B.

Communication liaisons. Related to the themes of leadership and a faculty-driven process, those tasked with the development and implementation of a new curriculum need to broadly represent campus stakeholders, not only to be a voice for the groups that members represent, but also to communicate the committee or taskforce’s plan and progress as communication liaisons to their constituents. Leadership needs to ensure that the faculty, administrators, and students who are in key roles in the process truly represent the populations who will be impacted by the revision.

The committee at Institution A had a representative from every college. “The committee decided we needed to review every course. That meant there was someone from every college sitting in that room and they pretty much unanimously said this,” said an administrator at Institution A. “We had point representatives in each college for people to ask if they had questions.”

Institution C also took proactive steps to ensure the committee charged with revisions and implementation represented the campus broadly. This became a primary tool to communicate information about the revision back to those stakeholders and mitigate concerns. “Another role and we all had this on the committee, was to take information back to our schools,” said a professional college representative who served on the committee. “Another role was to attend as many university forums as possible as part of the gen ed committee. When we had those, we would only put certain people on the stage in front of the audience, but faculty, students, and staff, anyone could ask questions. For instance, if a colleague from another professional school like engineering had a question, I may stand up and say ‘oh, here’s what we thought we may do to address that concern.’ Having the committee members be present as much as they possibly

could, we couldn't be there for every single one, but as long as there was a representative group there that made a really big difference in terms of communicating about the [curriculum]." In this instance, members could seek commonalities within their disciplines that may help colleagues in another part of campus resolve their own questions or issues.

Beyond answering questions at public events, the representatives were expected to alert their colleges and offices to the planned changes. "We tried to disseminate information using the members of the committee as a conduit of information to take back to their units on campus. There was a lot of reporting back," said a faculty member from Institution C.

A lack of broad representation became challenging for Institution B. Individuals there explained that not all of the colleges had a representative on the committee. "If we had better representation on the taskforce, I think when we went out to campus with this, we would have had a better understanding of the pitfalls. We also may have come up with very different ideas," said a faculty member and college administrator on the task force. "But by the time we went out to campus for input, it was hard to do things significantly different. You don't have the creativity anymore, because here's the proposal. I think engaging more people on campus during the actual development would have been critical."

Beyond representation for all stakeholders, taskforce members felt like they were not taken seriously for their role when they tried to serve as communication liaisons with the groups they represented. "They may not know much about curriculum so they weren't thinking through what I was telling them. Then when we got to the end, many of them were upset, but I was telling them about it all along," said a college administrator on the task force.

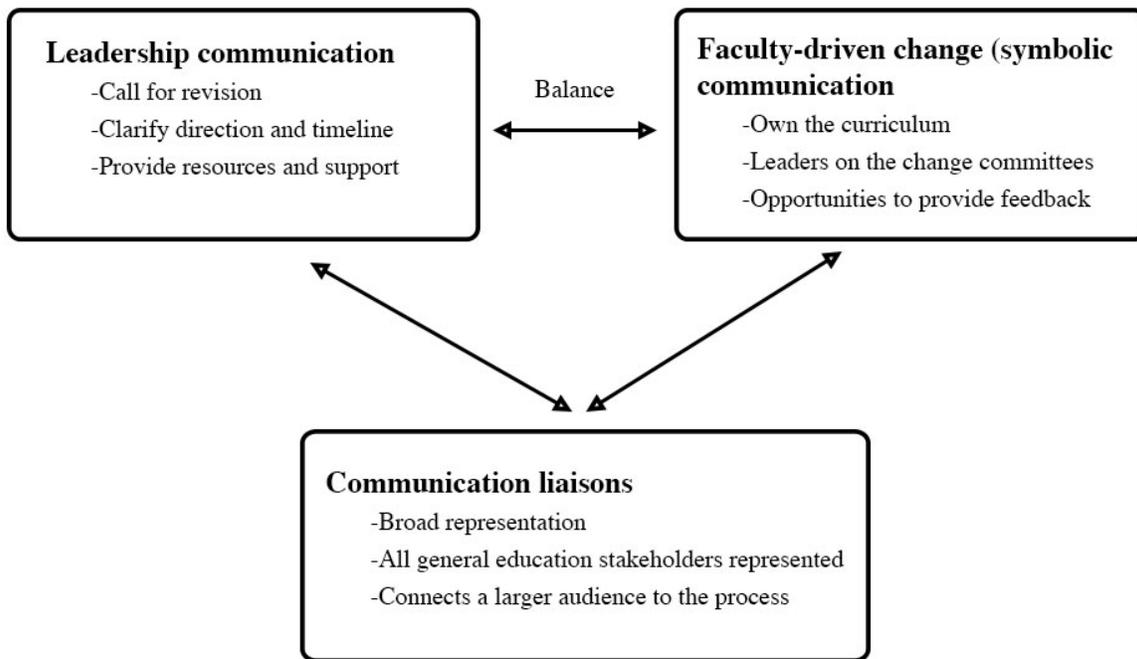


Figure 5. Model of structural composition of task force/committees charged with general education revision and implementation.

Communication Strategies

Face-to-face communication. Face-to-face communication, which varied from public forums, meetings with individuals and departments, presentations, and even professional development opportunities such as faculty workshops and institutes, were critical to successful revisions. Institutions A and C had robust face-to-face opportunities that served as a tool to update the community on revision and implementation progress, but were also used to collect feedback on their plan. While Institution B offered some face-to-face opportunities, representatives expressed frustration that they were not well publicized, so they did not get the engagement they sought.

Institution A held several campus forums to talk about the revision and implementation process. But they reached an even larger constituency through more direct engagement. “From this office, we spent a lot of time visiting places. Just going to different departments and talking to them about the changes in the gen ed program,” said an administrator. “I think the face-to-face was the most effective, with a relatively small group, sitting around a table. If it’s just, here’s our website – that’s great as a resource – but it’s not necessarily the most engaging path.”

The university also offered professional development for faculty, which served as a communication tool to increase buy-in and engagement, and smooth the implementation process. “We also took advantage of our [office for teaching development]. They ran all of these workshops regularly and we just took them over and turned them into gen ed workshops,” said the administrator. “This was something that people knew about already, it wasn’t a new thing, but now the focus was on general education. It was a familiar path for learning about new things going on around campus.”

Institution C held at least one public forum every semester, though multiple were held in some earlier semesters in the planning process, to inform the community on the committee’s progress and get feedback. “We had a lot of faculty forums, which is essentially an open campus meeting with a moderator,” said a faculty member from Institution C. “We collected feedback and took it back to our committee meetings and we would debate it. There was a lot that came out of the forums that we ended up doing. There were some things that came out of them that we ended up revising. The forums were a really good way not only to hear from people but also to find out how broadly a view was embraced. Was there one person coming to advocate a certain point of view or 20? Were they all from the same department?”

The forums served as an effective way to engage the broader university community. “The number one way I heard about [progress on the general education revision] was through the forums,” said an advisor at Institution C. “You could go to it live or watch it online. From a third party office, that’s how I heard about it.” Beyond direct face-to-face contact, this institution was able to simulate that experience for stakeholders who may not be able to make it to a physical meeting or forum through live streaming. This served to reap the same benefits of physical face-to-face communication.

Beyond the larger forums, presentations and meetings with smaller groups served as an important tool to open up dialogue and keep the revision on track, similar to the approach at Institution A. “One-on-one is where the trust happens. You have to come across as trust worthy, which means knowledgeable but also caring about the other person’s situation. ... But they also have to leave the meeting with the sense that this is going to happen,” said an administrator at Institution C.

Institution B held a few campus forums during the revision process, but taskforce members said they struggled to promote the events, and therefore, attendance was low. While

they were able to collect some feedback from those meetings, a lack of representation hurt their efforts. “The one issue – it was hard to get people to take it seriously. To come to meetings – we had a few town hall meetings but to get people to come and realize that now we are really thinking about doing something different this time,” said a college representative who served on the taskforce. After little feedback from the community, the task force was hurried to build a plan regardless to keep the process moving. “We eventually got a program and then started to take it on the road for input. Then people started getting very alarmed.” Another task force member, an administrator, said faculty had the opportunity to let their voices be heard by attending the task force meetings as a guest. They were open to the public, like governance meetings. “People could come to the meetings and sit and listen or even chime in if they had strong feelings or something to say. By law, our meetings, unless they are dealing with personnel issues, are always open. Those were announced [on the provost office website] when the committee was going to meet.”

Even with more limited face-to-face opportunities to engage the broader university community, the forums and meetings were still key to the taskforce to get feedback on their plan and adapt to address concerns from their peers. “We had a town hall where we got a good deal of feedback. After we incorporated that, the plan looked much different than when it started. I think folks saw there were several compromises after that meeting,” said a faculty member and college administrator at Institution B.

Target communications to specific audiences. As with many communication challenges, one particular tactic or medium was not effective for all stakeholders in the general education revisions and implementations at each institution. Interviewees said it was important for them to tailor the message and medium to individual audiences – one size did not fit all. Individuals at Institution C said they looked for every possible channel to share news about forums, plan progress, and other updates. “We used pretty much all of the tools to say, this is what we’ve got,” said a faculty member from Institution C. “We would get the word out on as many fronts as possible,” said an academic administrator.

For example, forums tended to be an effective face-to-face communication tactic to reach faculty. Students rarely attended the forums at each school, but Institutions A and C both said it was typical for a reporter with the student newspaper to come and report on some of the forums. I was able to confirm this through an archive search on the student newspaper websites. So,

while the forums themselves did not attract students, the student newspapers were able to serve as a medium to keep the student population informed and engaged.

The general education websites, particularly at Institutions A and C, became a key medium to break down messaging by audience. Often, the site was organized into key stakeholders. “The website had across the top, depending on who you were, things of interest to you. So whether you were a prospective student, or a faculty member, or an advisor, you might go to things that have targeted information for that particularly constituency,” said an administrator at Institution A. The communications specialist at Institution A echoed this intention. “The website is like a one-stop shop for everyone. They can get all of the information they need. We write the section specific for the intended audience.”

Universities began to embrace divergent messages and mediums especially in the period just before and during implementation. Prior to that, the revision teams primarily tried to reach faculty because of their larger role in the revision process, but after plan approval, the scope widened to encompass more audiences – advisors and what they need to know to help current and prospective students with their plan of study; current students and if the new curriculum impacts them; prospective students and how the curriculum can be used for recruitment; and faculty and how they will continue to contribute to the development and implementation of a robust curriculum. Since those audiences often access information in different ways, these institutions said it was key to create tailored outreach plans for each audience. “For us, it was every available channel and get the things out there. Be aware of who the different audiences are. Hit it in every way that you can. And it was a lot of not relying on people to come to the message,” said an administrator at Institution A.

Spotlight unique elements. In order to engage diverse audiences in both the revision and implementation process, universities found it was helpful to spotlight the curriculum’s unique elements. For faculty, universities can emphasize they will be able to use their creativity and build new and innovative courses. College deans can use the opportunity to highlight their faculty’s recognized expertise and add value to the general education program. Students get the chance to take new courses that may be more relevant to their interests as well as their academic and career goals. As mentioned previously, there was an intent to target the communication to the audience, but in particular, through highlighting the aspects of the new curriculum that were unique and tailored to that audience. How does the new curriculum make the institution stand out

from others? How does the curriculum fit into the institution's mission, goals, and culture? Faculty were often the ones who had developed these unique elements during the revision process, so spotlighting the uniqueness became a communication tactic, in particular, with advisors and prospective students in their families as a recruitment strategy. "Whenever we talked about the new general education program, we talked about the [new unique general education] courses. There was a lot of effort to get faculty buy in with those courses," said a communications specialist with Institution A. "I think what made this successful is, as I reflect back on it, is that there was an element or two that was new that could be promoted as special. We located those together so the dean saw this is something we are doing that is not being done elsewhere."

The revisions may give students new types of courses to take or allowed them to experience courses that may have been closed off with the old curriculum. "We would sell that – you now have the opportunity to take other courses on parts of campus that were otherwise closed or maybe not appealing because it wouldn't have counted towards anything, but now they do," said an administrator with Institution A.

One of the institutions created a new and special name for the general education program, which became a way to communicate the curriculum as fresh and appealing. "[The name] helps define general education, not only as [the name] but what's in it. The easier it is to make it memorable for people," said a faculty member at Institution C. "Certainly something like the [the name of the curriculum] is much more memorable and sounds more interesting than 'general education.' Maybe its time to stop using general education so much because then people associate it with really looking backwards."

Beyond renaming the curriculum, Institution C touted the revisions as something that set the university apart from its peers. "I would say it became one of the ways we defined [the university]. It was something new and it was something looking forward. When students come to campus its part of the presentation that they make. The reaction from parents was really positive as well," said a faculty member. "I don't know if there was a real process to use it for recruiting, but I certainly think it became one of the selling points."

Meanwhile, this theme ebbed and flowed for Institution B. One administrator said that individually, she would tout some of the revised curriculum's unique elements during open houses with prospective students and their families, but she was not sure, and doubted, if the

same thing happened in other colleges on campus. One taskforce member expressed frustration that the new curriculum was never used by central communications or admissions to try to entice students to enroll. “There was never an attempt to show students that this is really something special that you are going to get here that you are not going to get elsewhere. That was such an opportunity lost.” The attempt to come at Institution B to highlight the unique elements of the curriculum was disjointed because there was no attempt to build a unified message about the curriculum. Attempts to tout it were isolated and, therefore, less effective.

Transparency. Institutions emphasized the importance of transparency throughout the revision and implementation process. This included open communication about plans, resources, and incorporation of feedback in face-to-face meetings. “We just tried really hard using the forums to address the naysayers. There were some who came that were borderline rude. We tried to overcome with transparency,” said a college representative from Institution C. “[Leadership] made [themselves] available to meet with anyone and everyone who had questions and concerns. We wanted to be open.”

Another form of transparency was a clearly stated process, with a timeline and opportunities for individuals to be engaged and provide feedback. Transparency was also achieved through online tools, with minutes from meetings posted in a timely manner, presentation recordings and slides available to review, and even functionality to provide feedback via the website. “It’s really important not to get bogged down and for people to know there’s a website where the information is posted, there are faculty forums every six months. There’s a website where you can send questions and comments. There was transparency and we did not want to be delayed by politics,” said an administrator with Institution C.

As mentioned earlier, Institution B suffered from missteps with leadership, particularly that leadership poorly communicated their expectations to the taskforce and with the rest of the university community. This led the taskforce to believe leadership had a hidden agenda. Individuals told me there was a lack of transparency; particularly that the provost’s goal was to cut the number of required credit hours, not actually revamp the curriculum. “They [leadership] did not try to communicate that [desire to cut credit hours]. It was a buried agenda. They felt probably correctly that the faculty would be upset with that. How that was conveyed to the committee was very subtle. The administrators on the committee understood that there was a sort

of command there. I don't think others really did. It was never communicated or justified," said a college representative who served on the taskforce.

Relevancy. Overlaid on all communication strategies and tactics was the need to sell the relevancy of general education, and in particular the institution's revised curriculum, to stakeholders. This includes faculty – and much of this angle was fleshed out among faculty groups during the revision process as faculty determined the overarching goals of the institution's general education curriculum and what knowledge and skills students should have when they graduate.

The other key audience, however, to reach is students, prospective students, and their families who want to know why they are required to fulfill general education requirements, which cost time in their plan of study and money to complete. As addressed in my literature review, the media and government are calling into question the real purpose of a college education. Students and families are looking for a return on investment. "It was clear from some focus group work I had done a few years prior that students didn't like the general education program. They told me that I am paying for this so I shouldn't have to take these classes. It wasn't clear if even the advisors really understood the purpose of the general education program. It was talked about in getting it out of the way. What we were trying to do is make it seem more relevant," said a faculty member at Institution B. "I went to freshman orientation where the associate dean of my college said the gen ed requirements were just so med school saw they were well-rounded. We didn't have a message we were sending students. So no wonder they hated it."

Beyond communication to make sure students know what to take to fulfill requirements, institutions also felt compelled to sell the "why" behind general education and how their institution's version of general education made them a more competitive student and graduate. "It said this is distinctive, special unique and what we do at [the university]. Your bachelor's degree means you've gone through this," said a college representative at Institution C. "The selling point is that you are going to be graduating an informed 21st century student, not just academically but being prepared for jobs. Not long ago, we never would have been talking job-ready but now we have to. When your student completes the [general education curriculum], they will be job ready." Advisors used relevancy when working with students at Institution C so students would not think the curriculum was just filler. "To say it doesn't matter what your major

is, it cuts across disciplines. That to me is part of the reason why there's such value in higher education. Messaging that to students early and often, that's what makes this degree so special and you get the expertise in your discipline. We should shout that from the rooftops."

While this theme of relevancy came up in the interviews, it was echoed as a central theme in the supplemental communications materials that I reviewed (including brochures and websites) as well as media coverage on the curricular changes at each institution. In general, these materials often led with information about why an institution has a general education curriculum, the general education values that institution holds, and how the program will create a better graduate in the end.

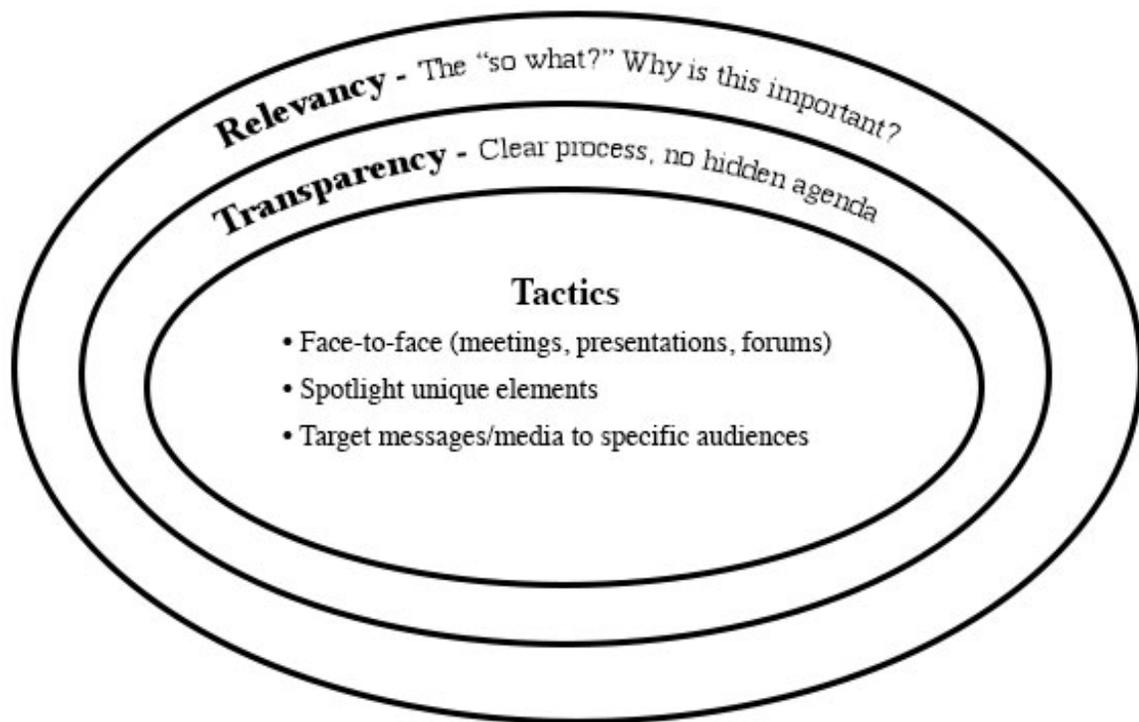


Figure 6. Communication strategy model during a general education revision.

Table 1

Universities and the Case Study Themes

| | Institution A | Institution B | Institution C |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Leadership | Called for revision, outwardly supported work of revision team | Formed revision taskforce, distanced from the process, no additional resources | Called for revision, members part of revision committee, outward support for revision team |
| Faculty-driven | Prior revision failed due to lack of faculty involvement, second (successful) attempt led by faculty | Task force went around normal faculty-led curriculum committees, faculty felt disengaged | Faculty and administrative co-chairs on revision committee, faculty experts chairs on subcommittees |
| Broad representation | All colleges represented on the revision team | Not all colleges represented on the revision taskforce | All college represented on the revision committee |
| Face-to-face communication | Multiple campus forums, faculty development opportunities | Only a few campus forums, taskforce members not taken seriously about changes by peers | Many campus forums, presentations and meetings |
| Spotlight unique elements | Marketed unique courses created because of the new program to prospective and current students | Unique elements not publicized and today are underutilized | Branded the curriculum with a special name |
| Target to specific audiences | Outreach individualized to the audience, website categorized by audience | Not much outreach beyond advisers/students making sure requirements are met | Used various mediums to connect with diverse stakeholders |
| Transparency | Clear revision and implementation process laid on our website, meeting minutes share widely | Leadership did not express their desire to cut credit hours with the larger community | Regular status updates through forums and the website |
| Relevancy | Took steps to sell the reasoning behind how the new program would create better students/graduates, especially through a brochure for students | Taskforce attempted to make the program more relevant after hearing concerns from students | Emphasized how the curriculum would help students be “job ready” |

Discussion

In my case study of the three universities, the themes I discovered largely mapped back research on change management, but within the context of why the change process is different at a higher education organization. This study connects those areas of research to guide public relations professionals in their efforts to assist in a major change process at a university.

Structure of Revision and Implementation Team

The first grouping of themes – leadership communication, faculty-driven change as symbolic communication, and communication liaisons – echo previous research on higher education organization and culture and change in higher education. The balance between strong leadership communication, while still having the process be primarily driven by faculty echoes Tierney's (1988, 2008) emphasis on shared governance, that both groups have to be balanced and have their voices heard. The balance between leadership and faculty serves a symbolic communication function that upholds the shared governance model present within academia. Kezar (2013) noted the unique culture of the academy, with tenured faculty, shared governance, and multiple power and authority structures, among other factors, greatly impacts change processes. This is revealed in the themes I discovered of needing leadership to prompt a general education revision, provide support, and keep it on track, but balanced with faculty in leadership positions, responsible for making decisions about the make-up and implementation of a new curriculum. Kezar and Eckel (2003) noted strategies for successful transformations in higher education institutions that included administrative support and collaborative leadership, as evidenced in the themes.

Threaded within the administration and faculty power balance is allocation of resources. While someone like the president or provost, in a high leadership position within a university, often makes decisions regarding the university's overall budgets and where money flows, the unique power structure of a university – in particular the concept of tenured faculty who can very rarely be fired by the leadership of the institution – makes it possible for people lower on the organizational chart (faculty) to demand resources to implement a change prompted by leadership. The way the resources flow within this context serves as a way the priority of the change is communicated among leadership and faculty. For example, at Institution B, the

individuals I interviewed indicated that leadership forced the revisions through, without much faculty engagement in the process. Then leadership did not invest resources in implementing some of the more innovative elements of the curriculum. Because faculty did not receive support for those elements, they did not come to fruition as the taskforce envisioned. In this way, money talked; when the resources were not provided, faculty disengaged from the process. “Faculty development is critical. I didn’t see the faculty development effort that I think we needed to have. Some office needs to decide that they are going to take ownership and apply resources, have seminars, and have workshops. And that didn’t really happen,” said a faculty member and college administrator at Institution B. Kezar and Eckel (2003) emphasized the importance of staff development as a key strategy to support a higher education transformation.

Communication Strategy

The second set of themes surrounding communication strategy also brought together ideas from prior research on general education revision and change management communication. The institutions I analyzed spoke about face-to-face meetings being one of the most important communication tactics throughout the revision and implementation process. Kotter (1996) recommends forums and opportunities for two-way dialogue as key to communication within change management. This opportunity was also noted by researchers who explored public relations practices geared to internal audiences, such as Barrett’s (2002) Strategic Employee Communication Model which emphasized things like meetings and forums as a primary way to create open conversations about the desired change, which increased employee moral. Torppa and Smith (2011) found an all-day meeting about the reasons for a change within an organization led employees to be more receptive to the change. The importance of face-to-face communication opportunities was also reflected in research on general education revisions, with meetings and forums noted as a communications tactic for the revisions at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Kean, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2008) and the University of North Dakota (Gano-Phillips & Barnett, 2010).

Institutions within my case study analysis also emphasized the need for transparency in communications about the revision and implementation processes. This connects back to research in public relations and change communication, general education, and higher education organization and change. Public relations can provide opportunities for open communication

about a plan for change, through events, technology, and other media, that encourage transparency and reduce resistance to change (Barrett, 2002; Klein, 1996; Linke & Zerfass, 2011; Torppa & Smith, 2011). Higher education change literature also underscored the value of transparency to initiate change, particularly because of the shared governance model (Kezar, 2013). Without transparency, one element of the shared governance structure (faculty or administrators) could seek to disrupt the change process if they feel as though they are being left in the dark. Open communication, in particular, is central to a general education revision process (Fuess & Mitchell, 2001; Kean, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2008).

Finally, the theme of relevancy connected back to previous research, particularly for general education reform, but also within change communication, bringing those fields together for my specific area of research. Organizations like AAC&U advocate for general education reform for this very reason – to develop individuals who are prepared for varied educational and career paths, going beyond one discipline to create a well-rounded individual. Institutions that decide to undertake a revision of their curriculum must determine what they want all students to know – concepts and skills – regardless of their discipline. The relevancy of the curriculum must then be passed on to the faculty who will develop the new curriculum, to the students who will be in the program. As Awbrey (2005) stated, general education reform is not just a curricular change, but that it reshapes the institution's culture. The way a general education curriculum is structured reflects the values of the institution and what is seen as important to its undergraduate students.

In summary, the themes that emerged within this case study can be traced back to both literature in change communication and change in higher education. Public relations practitioners in higher education environments can use this study as an example that brings together the two bodies of research to begin to build best practices for change communication in higher education.

Looking specifically at the three universities I analyzed, I believe the expertise of public relations professionals may have been underutilized in these cases, both during the change process itself and at the university level after the curricula were implemented; however, I will note that many of the campuses expressed that their institution was just beginning to grow its public relations team. If larger teams had existed during their revision process, they may have tapped those people for support. Public relations has the opportunity to support major change initiatives within higher education institutions such as the revision of a general education

curriculum. Looking at the themes that emerged, particularly in the realm of communication strategy, each is an area that public relations professionals are trained to supplement, support, and lead, when necessary. In addition, with emerging technologies such as social media, blogs, live streaming, surveys, and more on the horizon, public relations professionals have a bigger toolbox to increase transparency in a change process and offer more outlets for two-way communication and feedback. Particularly for larger universities with a global presence, face-to-face communication by way of a physical meeting may not be possible, but through technology, it can be simulated to engage a broader audience and increase participation and buy-in during the change process.

As it becomes more typical for public relations professionals to have a voice within leadership at higher education institutions, I anticipate a higher level of involvement during these types of transformational changes at colleges and universities.

Limitations

While the case study helped bridge the gap between various areas of research to inform other universities considering or going through a major change such as general education reform, the results come with some limitations. First, I only spoke to a small number of people involved in the change process at each institution. While I was able to note common threads among the interviewees, an expanded pool for data collection may have revealed more about the revision and implementation successes and missteps at each university.

In addition, my interview pool was intentionally structured to only include individuals who held leadership roles as the process unfolded at each campus. It did not include faculty outside the leadership committees/taskforces, prospective students, current students, alumni, and other stakeholders. I anticipate the experiences of these groups during the reform were different from those who were embedded in it. Further research could look at the experiences of groups that are impacted by the change process, but who do not hold central roles during the revision and implementation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This case study brings together the fields of change management and change communication/public relations with higher education organization and change. In particular, it equips public relations practitioners who support higher education institutions with recommendations to follow if their institution is faced with a major change, such as the revision and implementation of a new general education curriculum. It offers insight into the structure of the change team and what that communicates to the stakeholders, as well as communication strategies and tactics to guide a smoother change process.

With the experiences of these three institutions in mind, in combination with best practices from research in change management, change communication, and higher education organization and change, I have developed a set of recommendations for other public relations practitioners and/or administrators who may be guiding or leading a similar change effort at a higher education institution.

- Set a clear timeline and share it widely. There should be a clear start to the change process (e.g. inclusion in a strategic plan, an event announcement, or a memo or letter to the university announcing the start). With the official kick-off, an anticipated timeline for the change process should be laid out with expected dates for feedback and decision-making. This timeline may be edited during the process, but it gives a sense of transparency to the broader community and offers opportunities for all stakeholders to see where they fit in the process, even if they are not directly on the revision committee or taskforce.
- Build a revision and implementation team that broadly represents the stakeholders who will be impacted by the planned change. This step ensures that each group has a voice at the table, while also providing a communications liaison back to all of those groups, as addressed within the themes of my case study. Make sure faculty members lead the team, with administrative support in the way of resources, professional development, incentives, public relations, and other support functions. Use the institution's traditional governance channels to process the change through the university.

- Provide frequent updates on the progress of the revision and implementation, in both face-to-face and virtual environments. Regular town halls or forums that are open for stakeholders to attend are important for updates on the change process, but also to allow for feedback from the community. Virtual updates, through campus communication tools and social media, are also key for individuals who may not be able to attend face-to-face events.
- Build an identity or brand around the change, within the context of the university's larger brand and culture. They should work in tandem. By creating a signature name for the change, you give audiences a way to talk about the change process and its end result. This can help amplify how the change sets the institution apart from its peers.
- Tailor communication messages and tactics to the audience. For example, some events may be best for a faculty audience, while students would benefit from a different format. Websites can offer easy ways to tailor messages to specific stakeholder groups. Your target audience may also fluctuate depending on the stage of the change for your institution. A website offers an opportunity for focused messaging throughout the change process.
- Be transparent through the change process. The process likely will not go as originally intended, but you will get more support and buy-in if you share everything, including bumps in the process. This eliminates the fear of a hidden agenda.
- Before, during, and after the change process, the relevancy of why the change is necessary should be a prominent aspect of all communication. Change is difficult and is often resisted, particularly within an organization with diverse individuals and perspectives. The relevancy of the change can help unite members of the institution. It is impossible to get everyone to agree on all of the smallest details related to the change, but the "why" behind the change can lead to compromises that benefit the whole institution.
- Public relations professionals should be an integral part of change management teams at universities. As a change is being considered and planned, identify the public relations practitioner(s) that can support the team, utilizing their expertise in building and shaping communication to your intended audiences. Practitioners are trained to build strategies to engage with key audiences by providing them transparent

information while also finding ways to encourage a two-way dialogue so audiences can provide feedback to the change management team.

The themes that emerged through the case study and my above recommendations speak to one of Kotter's (1996) key ideas in his change management process. He claimed a major error during a change process is "undercommunicating the vision by a factor of 10 (or 100 or even 1,000)" (p. 9). If you are involved in a change process, either through membership on the change committee or in a support role like public relations, it may feel like you are talking about the change process too much; however, it is unlikely that individuals who are not in a central role will feel the same way. Talk about the process and implementation often, through as many channels as possible, while being mindful of process transparency and the relevancy of the desired change.

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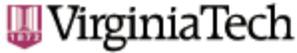
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IRB Approval



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MEMORANDUM

DATE: November 11, 2015
TO: Alison Ruth Cordell Matthiessen, Rachel L Holloway
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA0000572, expires July 29, 2020)
PROTOCOL TITLE: Role of communication during the implementation of new general education curricula
IRB NUMBER: 15-1032

Effective November 11, 2015, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: **Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 5,6,7**
Protocol Approval Date: **November 11, 2015**
Protocol Expiration Date: **November 10, 2016**
Continuing Review Due Date*: **October 27, 2016**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

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| Date* | OSP Number | Sponsor | Grant Comparison Conducted? |
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* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this IRB protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the IRB office (irbadmin@vt.edu) immediately.