Leadership Transitions in a multi-institution AGEP Alliance: Legacies, Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The NY-PUI Alliance: This Alliance brings together three universities with the goal of developing, implementing, studying, institutionalizing, evaluating and disseminating a model focusing on career development for AGEP population doctoral students in STEM. This activity includes transitioning to early career STEM faculty positions at predominately underrepresented institutions (PUIs), or those with predominately underrepresented faculty. As part of this process, and their transition into early career STEM faculty positions at PUIs. The AGEP PUI Alliance works with STEM undergraduate and graduate students who are in their early career and early career faculty to provide them with mentoring, professional development training, and the teaching pedagogy skills necessary to success faculty positions. AGEP PUI Alliance leadership teams work through partnerships between Stony Brook University - The State University of New York (SUNY), Suffolk County Community College - SUNYF, and Farmingdale State College - SUNY.

This poster is dedicated in loving memory of Dr. David J. Ferguson, Distinguished Service Professor, Department of Technology and Society at Stony Brook University. Dr. Ferguson served as Principal Investigator on the NY-PUI Alliance and a co-investigator on every Stony Brook AGEP since its arrival to Stony Brook, and SUNY in 2008. “When great souls die, after a period of pain and depression, there is always a renewal.” — Maya Angelou.

Unplanned Change and Crisis Management

Shawn Bonds (2017) defines unplanned change as “Organizational change due to circumstances not planned for and not necessary to achieve organizational goals or performance needs as made necessary by shifts in the organizational environment.” Each leadership transition experiences unplanned change. This process aims to prevent opportunity for project advancement during periods of significant leadership transition. When leadership transitions occur, views and priorities for project goals can lead to a successful outcome. Bonds argues that leadership must think through, plan, and guide an organization’s movement through each of these transition stages. Transitions, particularly when they overlap, are simultaneous, and lacking space for reflection can lead to organizational chaos. Leadership teams, exhausted, overwhelmed, and uncertain of mission or purpose (Bonds, 2017), make a needed and often overlooked skillset needed by Alliance Leadership in moments of unplanned change.

Unplanned Change Vs. Transition Change

Change is an event that triggers the critical process of transition in an organization (Eckel et al., 1999). This transition phase is not without challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated that when the institutional leadership team anticipating the possibility of leader transition, the lead institution (National Science Foundation) accepts a position at another institution (Henderson et. al, 2012). During Negotiations, the Alliance project is crucial. Rapid change and leadership transitions can help mitigate the challenges to project progress. Teams must be open to rethinking and responding to new team members within the Alliance Organization. Without a robust transitional plan in place for mitigating unplanned change, the original PI left is filled by the role of new leadership and the new leadership team is notified of the unexpected passing of the Principal Investigator at one of the Alliance institutions. Desiring stability and consistency during an emotionally charged time, the original PI left for new team members. These transitions, particularly when they overlap, are simultaneous, and lacking space for reflection can lead to organizational chaos. Leadership teams, exhausted, overwhelmed, and uncertain of mission or purpose (Bonds, 2017), make it difficult for new team members to understand and respond to the cultural dynamics within the institution. When unplanned change occurs, the response is often intuitive, fast paced, on-impulsion and not reflective on what didn’t work and didn’t work in our process, and structures that could allow for a deeper bench for preparation for future unplanned change and crisis management.

The Coronavirus pandemic brought with it additional unplanned and unexpected changes for which the Alliance needed to rethink, reframe, and adapt to fit as part of the Alliance team. Faculty and staff expertise from multiple institution types and areas of expertise in critical topics such as online learning, team management, project management, student development and community engagement was provided for the opportunity to think carefully, and from multiple perspectives on how best to sustain a sense of cohesiveness and meaningful work. Long standing interventions could continue in a distance format. Continuing the Alliance practice of biweekly team meetings, adding technological capabilities such as recording, transcribing, and asynchronous workflows environments (Microsoft Teams) also allowed the Alliance team to continue in the face of changing availability and schedules.

In recent months all Alliance institutions have added to both their internal and external leadership teams and to their project management teams, through the addition of more Co-PIs and staff to support team efforts. These additions have resulted in deeper “benchers” at both these leadership levels to provide longer-term strategic planning and in such an area we are able to maneuver and rethink roles and work shifts when crisis occurs. The Alliance is currently recruiting its second cohort of participants who we anticipate will also conduct the majority of their research and educational levels on-line until it is safe for us to return to group convening. Alliance is rethinking its current meeting structure to allow responsible parties and teams to meet with deeper focus on one project outcomes (qualitative research, dissemination, scholarly research, program evaluation, etc.).

Transition Lessons Learned: All aspects of Alliance and project activity should be a continuous line of assessment, evaluation, and change. This requires understanding of previously untried and unexpected relationships, organizational behavior, and community engagement theory. This requires understanding of previously untried and unexpected relationships, organizational behavior, and community engagement theory. This requires understanding of previously untried and unexpected relationships, organizational behavior, and community engagement theory.