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LEADERSHIP AND AMERICAN INDIAN VALUES: THE TRIBAL COLLEGE DILEMMA

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The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the need for research in organizational governance and decision-making that takes into account the values that are inherent to American Indian culture, and hence, to tribal community colleges.

We begin with a discussion of the rational model of organizational governance and decision-making in higher education; we have chosen the rational model because it is the most prevalent organizational theory to analyze postsecondary organizations (Pfeffer, 1981; Chaffee, 1983). We summarize the model in terms of five elements which serve as a framework for diagnosing organizations (Scott, 1981), and then analyze the model's assumptions from the standpoint of our experiences with tribal colleges. Deficiencies of the model manifest themselves as conflicts between the model's assumptions and the values that underlie the tribal college mission. As a result, we propose an alternative way to view an organization and suggest further avenues for investigation.

As elaborated by Scott, the elements of an organization are: goals, participants, technology, environment, and social structure. According to Scott, these five elements characterize all organizations, regardless of purpose or nature. While the elements serve as standards for diagnosing organizations, the way one interprets elements--such as organizational goals or the environment--depends heavily on the way participants view their organization. How we understand our world in large part determines how we interpret elements such as the social structure. The struggle for tribal community colleges is to understand their organizations from their own perspective, as well as that of the dominant society.

The Rational Model

Goals. The rational model assumes that consistent sets of goals exist in organizations (Pfeffer, 1981). Organizations, through decision-making processes of reasoned problem solving, strive to achieve maximal outcomes related to their goals. According to the rational model, when an issue arises that demands action the process of making decisions consists of three basic steps. First, organizational participants develop a set of alternatives. Second, they assess the likely outcomes or consequences of each of the alternatives. Third, decision makers select the alternatives or courses of action which in their view will maximize possibilities for achieving organizational goals. Efficiency is the underlying rationale for the model.

Goals are prerequisites for the decision-making process and act as strategic organizing principles. Organizational participants commit themselves to the goals of the organization and while the recommendations of the participants may vary, they agree on the goals which give meaning to their involvement in the decision-making process (Chaffee, 1985).

Participants. The necessity for a hierarchical organization is predominant to ensure an effective and efficient channel of communication. The unity-of-command principle determines that organizational participants achieve a degree of specialization for their tasks and that all employees receive orders from only one superior. The organization delineates its hierarchy through rules and regulations that spell out chains of command and work expectations of participants. A rigid hierarchy allows the organization to make it clear who is in charge and who is expected to do what.

Technology. Rational and logical problem solving skills are critical to technology in the rational model. Technical competence is particularly critical insofar as decision situations typically consist of complex sets of problems. Participants rely upon extensive and systematic uses of information for decision making and thus information-use skills are important.

Social Structure. The social structure is formal. Given the importance of specialization, the division of labor and differentiation of work tasks is essential. The organization prescribes values, roles, and social positions which are necessary in achieving organizational goals. Participants are united and bound together by common values which are consonant with the goals of the organization. Rather than having the flexibility to pursue divergent interests and to create organizational niches for themselves, participants are constrained by a normative social structure.

Environment. Managers must deal with the environment, but the organization exists divorced from environmental constraints and influences. Leaders derive goals not through interaction with the environment, but through internal discussions about what goals the organization should pursue (Chaffee, 1985). The environment exists "out there" and is a malleable object which managers fit to the organization's goals.

Leadership. Leadership is vested in a central authority who makes the final decisions. The right to give orders and exact obedience is a central tenet of the model. Individuals in the organization participate in decision-making and provide recommendations. However, decisions ultimately rest with the leader. This image of leadership assumes that the central figure is authoritarian; the leader has the confidence of organizational participants to make decisions and to lead the organization.

Tribal College Perspective. The rational model adheres to the Western belief in order, reason, and logic. In some respects, such a view is helpful to all administrators as they confront daily problems. Obviously, some degree of order is warranted in any organization. Otherwise, chaos, intuition, and anarchy may come to dominate organizational life. When such conditions dominate, it is difficult to imagine how any organization can be effective. Since the model emphasizes hierarchy and rigidity, however, it is inappropriate for tribal colleges insofar as they seem to emphasize informality and flexibility in decision-making.

In presenting the tribal college perspective, it is important first of all to discuss the ideals which underlie the rational model and compare them with the fundamental ideals of a tribal college. The rational model emphasizes the Western goals of efficiency and effectiveness with regard to both individual and organizational performance. The ultimate concern of organizations, according to the rational model, is to achieve goals through systematic and orderly processes with minimal waste of resources. The assumption is that all organizations are predicated on similar beliefs.

Our intent is not to call into question Western values such as those that the rational model promotes; rather we intend to demonstrate how American Indian values, and thus, tribally-controlled organizations, have widely divergent concepts about values and goals than those of mainstream organizations. For example, it is worth quoting Astin at length about the meritocratic nature of American higher education:

In a meritocracy . . . rewards are allocated on the basis of performance. The greatest rewards go to those who perform best. In a meritocratic society, competition plays a central role. . . . Meritocratic thinking reflects a peculiarly American preoccupation with measuring, ordering, and ranking (1981, p. 155).

From this perspective, a primary goal of American postsecondary education is to enable individuals to achieve status and success in society. Society measures success by the material rewards which one accrues. The emphasis is on individual competition. Meritocratic values are inherent in practices such as promotion, tenure, and classification/personnel systems.

American Indian culture, however, has goals that are neither competitive nor meritocratic. Instead, generosity, reverence for the earth, and wisdom are basic values (McNickle, 1973). Members of Indian societies demonstrate generosity through informal and formal means of giving or sharing. Indian societies measure status in terms of how individuals openly display generous deeds. The extent to which individuals acquire prestige depends upon the extent to which they share accumulated wealth with less fortunate individuals. Within Indian societies, a prevailing concern exists for the welfare of the group. Indians revere "mother earth" as the provider of life and as a symbolic representation of deeply-held religious beliefs. The earth provides food, shelter, and water, but also is part of the universe which is embedded with legends and supernatural powers that give meaning for Indian existence. Indians view the universe and the environment in a holistic fashion, rather than as a separate entity comprised of distinct parts.

Wisdom is the virtue that is held in highest esteem. Indian societies attribute wisdom to members who have consistently demonstrated adherence to Indian values and who possess visionary qualities to lead. Leadership qualities inherent in individuals endowed with wisdom transcend traditional concepts associated with leadership, such as personality traits or charisma. Central to the qualities possessed by the leader is the notion of spirituality, a condition that is neither learned nor certified, but is attained through the workings of a higher power or being. Indeed, it is wise individuals who sustain Indian culture and whose vision enables Indian societies to endure.

In its purest form, an organization that promotes American Indian values departs fundamentally from the rational organization. The departure stems from the assumptions which underlie the rational organization. For example, tribal colleges do not appear to have preexisting sets of goals which dictate decision-making. Participant welfare is of utmost concern and goals reflect group interests; goals emerge only as a result of extensive group interaction. Participants neither hold allegiance to preexisting goals, nor do they feel compelled by hierarchical chains of command and rigid rules and regulations. Participants tolerate institutional constraints on individual behavior insofar as these constraints do not stifle participatory decision-making.

Specialization, division of labor, and differentiation of work tasks are not predominant technologies as they are in the rational organization. Rather, knowledge of and skills in group dynamics, processes, and interactions are critically important. To be sure, individual labor and program tasks are differentiated, but boundaries between and among positions and programs remain blurred as responsibilities are shared to a high degree.

Unlike the rational organization, where social structure is mainly static and confined to organizational prescriptions for behavior, tribal colleges exhibit social structures that are dynamic and fluid. Participants have a pervasive concern for the group which is demonstrated by constant interactions to share ideas, information, and problems. Organizational values, roles, and social positions develop, but they persist only as long as they contribute to and reflect group interests. These elements of social structure undergo constant change and modification to coincide with emerging ideas and issues.

Instead of remaining distant from the environment, tribal colleges are integral to their environment from both a practical and a spiritual standpoint. Demonstrated concern for group welfare is virtuous, and tribal colleges appear to maintain an active relationship with other entities in the environment. Colleges interact regularly with clientele, tribal government, and other programs. Further, the environment conveys spiritual significance and meaning. Respect for the earth and maintaining harmony with nature are cherished Indian values. In this sense, colleges share a responsibility to protect the environment.

The leader in the tribal college is a facilitator and promoter of group values and interests. Instead of maintaining autocratic power by virtue of position, the tribal college leader develops authority by demonstrating competence and allegiance to the values which underlie the organization. Participants follow the leader not because of rules and regulations, but because the leader has demonstrated appropriate leadership qualities.

Table 1 compares the rational model with the tribal college model we have conceptualized. The table compares the two models across Scott's (1981) five organizational elements and across leadership and philosophical concepts which underlie each model. While the table is an oversimplification of organizational dynamics inherent to each model, it provides a useful means of comparison.

In summary, the rational model of governance and decision-making fails to be an adequate predictor of organizational behavior in tribal colleges.

TABLE 1
Two Forms of Governance and Decision Making

Elements	Rational	Tribal College
Goals	Prerequisite; Consistent across the organization; Organizing principles and focuses of decision-making	Consistent across the organization; Reflect group consensus; Emerge from participatory decision-making process
Participants	United by common values which relate to and are consonant with organizational goals	Concern for the welfare of the group; Not bound by organizational prescription
Technology	Rational; Logical problem solving; Extensive and systematic uses of information	Group interactions and processes; Sharing of information and knowledge
Environment	Closed system; No active interaction with environment; Develop goals through internal discussions	Open system; Active interaction with the environment; Holistic; Practical and spiritual meaning
Social Structure	Normative, participants bound by prescribed values; Formal, social positions defined for participants	Dynamic and fluid; Unity; Values change and modify to meet emerging ideas and issues
Leadership	Centralized; Authoritarian; Ultimate decision making authority with those of the group	Authority by virtue of demonstrated competence; Ideas and values compatible
Philosophy	Efficiency and Effectiveness	Unity; Generosity/sharing; Flexibility

Tribal college interpretations of the various aspects of an organization, such as goals, participants, and social structure digress fundamentally from the perspectives provided by the rational model. Tribal college managers cannot rely upon the rational model to synthesize effective leadership strategies that account for the basic values of American Indian culture. Yet, the development of such strategies is critical if tribal colleges are to effectively fulfill their dual responsibilities, which, in many respects, present a cultural dilemma.

A Cultural Dilemma

Tribal colleges, as entities of tribal governments, promote the self-determination aspirations of Indian people. While the maintenance of Indian culture provides the foundation for tribal college organization, the colleges also strive to integrate traditional disciplinary knowledge of mainstream society into their academic programs. The dual mission of maintaining tribal identity and acquiring knowledge and skills for mainstream society is evident in the mission statement of one tribal college which reads in part, "College students need preparation which will enable them to understand the ways of the larger society, as well as the customs and beliefs of the . . . people." Another college states as part of its mission, ". . . to incorporate the wisdom and beauty of (our) heritage with the knowledge and skills of our modern technological society."

In one sense the mission statements are paradoxical and pose a cultural dilemma. One wonders how an organization can successfully integrate diverging and conflicting concepts of knowledge. Indeed, criticism of tribal colleges from the Indian community often relates to this very question. For example, one tribal community member remarked, "The college is nothing more than a poor replica of existing (mainstream) higher education institutions" (personal correspondence). Another member explained, "The college needs to go beyond offering stock material. It needs to develop curriculum which will account for the total Indian experience" (personal correspondence). To adequately serve the needs of the people a tribal college must have effective strategies that draw upon the history and culture of tribal people.

A growing body of literature has pointed out how an organization reflects the people who exist in the organization (Morgan, 1987; Chaffee & Tierney, 1988). Such a view holds that even though rational and political factors influence organizational life, organizations are also influenced by strong forces that emanate from within. Proponents of a new model termed "organizational culture" assume that organizational life is reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it--without reference to rational or political goals. Organizational life concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level.

The organization is viewed as existing within a dynamic framework where participants help create and define the on-going nature of the organization. "This internal dynamic," notes Tierney, "has its roots in the history of the organization and derives its force from the values, processes and goals held by those most intimately involved in the organization's workings" (1988, page 3). A cultural model of the organization holds much promise for understanding tribal colleges. Rather than rely on rational goals or politically-inspired social structures, proponents of a cultural model seek to understand the reality of the organization from the participant's point of view, and then construct effective decision-making strategies.

Because the model is new, no research has been undertaken that investigates tribal colleges. We have attempted in this article to point out the shortcomings of previous models as they relate to tribal administrators. What remains to be done are studies that incorporate the unique nature of tribally-controlled colleges with a cultural model of the organization. Such a model will allow tribal administrators to develop strategies for their own organizations as they see fit, rather than have the tribal organization adapt to predefined concepts of what constitutes effective goals and decision-making.

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