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Evaluating the Performance of a Rural, Field-Based Teacher Training Program[1]

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Course completion rates as a routine measurement of performance in higher education are generally accepted, at least implicitly, as a feature of institutional life. When these institutional standards are applied to an innovative, rural field-based teacher training program, the resulting conflict over the evaluation of performance brings a re-consideration of such conventional practices. This study finds that the most successful field-based students, the graduates, show the worst performance when some conventional standards for course completions are applied. Some implications of these findings for innovation and change in higher education are reviewed.

Institutions of higher education conform to a group of practices and procedures which allow them to assess the status of various programs within their structure. Such practices and procedures may not necessarily equate directly to measures of efficiency and effectiveness, but serve to project an aura of legitimacy within the institution and to the rest of the world [1]. New programs are driven to adopt these institutionalized practices as a means of obtaining validity in the larger context. Thus, innovation may lead to conflict not only because of differing views, but also simply as the unintended result of institutional routines. This situation becomes more apparent when the innovative program must deviate from accepted norms in order to accomplish its goals. Such may be the case with the rural field-based teacher education program at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks (UAF). This program currently serves approximately 150 students per semester located in 45–50 villages in rural Alaska.

Field-based teacher education at UAF began in 1970 with the Alaska Rural Teacher Training Corps (ARTTC). This program was funded through federal and state grants from the National Teacher Corps and the Alaska State Department of Education (DOE). It began as a consortium of the Alaska State Operated School System, UAF, and the Alaska Methodist University (a private institution in Anchorage). The state DOE ran the program while the universities provided academic resources.

In 1975, the program came under the aegis of UAF, although still as an entity separate from regular academic programs. The name was changed to the Cross-Cultural Education Development (X-CED) Program. During the years as ARTTC and continuing with X-CED, the program developed and operated on the basis of its own administrative procedures, generally tied to UAF only by academic matters. For example, the program had its own curriculum, even though the academic credits came through UAF. Also, UAF held approval authority over instructional staff and the university had final review for graduates and certification. The course content, delivery, recruitment of students, schedule, operaing budget, and day-to-day administration remained in the hands of program staff. While each program led to the same type of degree and teacher certification, each used markedly different processes. These arrangements set in place a number of precedents which eventually would lead to a variety of tensions.

In 1981, X-CED was formally united with the Department of Education at UAF. Funding was secured through state appropriation and made a part of the university operating budget. Faculty received appointments in their academic disciplines. Curriculum change was initiated to bring the field and campus programs together. In 1982, the official description was "one faculty, one program." As is so often the case, things have not been as simple as this description might indicate. We will examine some of the issues that continue to plague this often unhappy marriage of purposive innovation and institutional convention.

This study examines the measurement of performance as an activity revealing of the conventional structure and process at universities (in this case UAF) and considers some of its effects upon an instance of innovation in higher education (in this case X-CED). The analysis will focus upon incompletes (i.e., grade of "I") both as a measure of performance and as an indicator of poor fit between the procedures of the campus and the real workings of the field. Our concern is not with performance

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per se but with the way in which administrative structure and process, rather than educational method, may shape the assessment of performance and, thereby, innovation itself. An analysis of X-CED provides some examples of how institutional practices support institutional views.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRUCTURE AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

While colleges and universities are arguably in the business of education, the services provided are only loosely "coupled" to the outcome claimed [1]. Close at hand, structure and process are aligned with more measurable and predictable intermediate activities. Claims of ultimate purpose aside, the university is organized to bring students and faculty together around an agenda of courses. These activities are closely coupled, evidenced by the high level of energy and attention paid to them administratively, while activities behind doors of classrooms are largely "de-coupled" from administrative action and are almost exclusively the domain of faculty. The parameters of organizational rationality [2] have become traditional: one contact hour per week per credit, 14–15 weeks per semester; 12–15 credit hours load per student per semester, etc. Programs that diverge from these traditions are seen as innovative by virtue of their deviation from what is "normal" in structure and process, not because of evidence that the education itself is different.

While becoming a part of UAF, the X-CED program sought to maintain its innovative elements and at the same time take advantage of the stability and institutional support the university provided. Many of the field-based practices have survived. Faculty connected to the program continue to staff field sites located in rural parts of the state and to travel to and work directly with students in remote villages. Teaching involves distance delivery techniques, relying upon packages of educational materials, field faculty visits, and telephone contact. Students tend to be somewhat older, often married, and settled into the everyday life of the village. For the most part, they are people unlikely to make the choice to relocate to an urban campus. The program struggles to maintain a coordinated system involving eight field sites, eleven faculty, and 125–150 students located in as many as 50 villages. With 25–50 courses offered each semester, it is possible for students to complete the entire B.Ed. degree in five to six years. To this date 112 have done so. These factors, among others, continue to distinguish the X-CED program from the equivalent degree program on campus.

The price for institutional support has included increasing pressures to conform to routine practices and an increased likelihood of comparison with the campus programs. While conflict might be anticipated from those openly critical of the program, other issues arose as the result of seemingly benign institutional practices. The differences between campus and field were not new and were not a product of institutionalization, but they became more noticeable by the close contrast and were elevated in importance once X-CED became part of the university.

For example, the rate of course completion for X-CED became more of an issue. Typically students complete 40% of the courses for a given semester's enrollment by semester's end. And, on average, 47% of the courses were left "incomplete." This phenomenon was not new, the figure for completions being relatively stable for a number of years (e.g., from spring 1981, through fall 1984), but it became more important as X-CED began to be scrutinized by the same criteria as other university programs.

Such measures appear to be taken for granted as an institutional practice. Course completions are uniformly accepted as a criterion of success of new programs or procedures. It was, therefore, a routine institutional response for UAF to use course completions as one measure of the effectiveness of the X-CED program whether that criterion really measured anything important or not. In fact, a search of the literature on higher education indicates that there is no active research on the value of course completions as an appropriate measure of efficiency.

One of the X-CED program's own innovative practices inadvertently contributed to the negative comparison. Operating with a loose "competency-based" philosophy of education, it has been normal practice in X-CED to withdraw students who are performing poorly in courses. A review of transcripts reveals mostly grades of "A" and "B," with "W" and "DF" (deferred, meaning "institutional failure") instead of "C's," "D's," and "F's." The practice on campus is to consider low grades, including "F's," as completions. Withdrawal is typically limited to the first two weeks of the semester and "DF" is reserved for natural disaster or death of the instructor. Each of these practices is supported by a plausible rationale; the confrontation of the two is an unintended consequence of propinquity.

This tension between conventional versus innovative practices was exacerbated by increasing pressures to comply with the academic calendar established for the university. No administrative directive was issued, but once again a variety of routine, unquestioned institutional practices conspired to shape X-CED in the likeness of campus programs. Prior to the 1983–84 academic year, X-CED had operated on a loose semester system. Classes generally started in the early fall and ended some time after mid-year, commencing the second semester in early spring and drawing to a close in early summer. There had been few reasons to comply strictly with the university calendar since the program operated autonomously, received little aid from the campus, and required little support from campus resources. A variety of reasons were offered to justify the actual practice, e.g., to coordinate with hunting and fishing by students in the bush, to meet the need for lengthy course and program preparation in late summer and early fall, and to allow for the poor mail service which disrupted schedules and introduced an element of "bush time" into all plans.

However, these justifications were increasingly challenged by a number of features of institutional life. With increased integration of faculty and programs, differences in schedule created problems as campus-based faculty became involved with field-delivered courses. While field

faculty had had extended contracts, typically 10 or 11 months, to accommodate course development and flexibility in the semester schedule, campus faculty were more typically employed for 9 months. Also, as field students came to rely more and more upon financial aid, the university calendar became increasingly restrictive since state and federal sources of aid rely upon the university to legitimatize the eligibility of students. A process has evolved that is closely tied to the cycle of enrollment, posting of grades, and confirmation of academic performance that is synchronized with the beginning and end of each semester. Variation from the university routine puts program activities out of sync with these institutional cycles and penalizes students. The X-CED program could not afford such penalties. These and other pressures have been hard to resist, and while they are not precursors to those practices responsible for the seemingly low level of course completion,they did serve to heighten the anxiety associated with criticism of the program and, more importantly, to leave fewer alternatives for resolving the situation.

As pressure mounted to increase the rate of completions, the program grappled with the conflict between its own practices and the available steps that would improve its performance in the eyes of the university. A typical semester's grades were made up of approximately equal proportions of completions (40%) and incompletions (47%), and significantly fewer withdrawals (13%). With no added resources or apparent opportunities for the improvement of delivery itself, the situation resembled a zero-sum game. That is, while less flexibility in the schedule might tend to decrease completions, the chief means of decreasing incompletes would be to increase withdrawals. Potentially, it could be argued, those incompletes could become successes; therefore, such steps have proved to be no remedy at all.

Lying behind much of this concern is a seldom questioned assumption that "incompletes" are for bad performance, that they reflect a failure of the program as well as of the students. On campus, incompletes are the exception. They are generally viewed as appropriate only under special circumstances and as a discretionary power held by faculty. History has established that for X-CED, on the contrary, incompletes are the rule rather than the exception. Little discretion can be involved when almost 50% of a semester's courses are classified as incompletes. This begs the question of whether incompletes truly signify a failure in the performance of the X-CED program or, on the other hand, are more correctly seen as an artifact of viewing field-based processes and procedures through a campus perspective.

METHOD

In order to examine factors associated with incompletes, data were gathered from student files for a period of three years, from the spring semester 1981, through the fall semester 1983. This time frame provided a total of 667 incomplete grades as a basis for the study.

The 667 incompletes were received by a total of 157 students. These students were divided, for the purposes of this study, into three groups: Graduates (24), those receiving their degrees by August, 1984; Continuing (57), those currently enrolled in the program; and Inactive (76), those not enrolled for the last two or more consecutive semesters. As we shall see, these groups provide a basis for comparison on measures of performance.

For each incomplete, the files provided data on the semester received, final grade received, and a basis for computing the number of months to completion (month completed - month received). This last measure, it should be noted, is truncated by the institutional limit of 12 months placed upon an "I" grade, i.e., after twelve months the incomplete is automatically converted to an "F."

FINDINGS

The data are summarized in Table 1 below. Incompletes are shown by student category for fall and and spring semesters along with the percentage comparisons for fall versus spring semesters. Related completions are shown, with percentages reflecting completions as a part of all incompletes for the respective semester and student group. The average number of months to completion is listed for all incompletes per semester and student group. Totals for all categories are provided.

The first observation of the data is that incompletes, per se, are a poor indicator of student performance. Indeed, Graduates, the most successful group, have the highest rate of incompletes received, averaging 6.54 per student. Looking at it this way, incompletes are inversely proportional to success, with Inactive students receiving the lowest rate, averaging only 3.54 incompletes. This does no appear to be an artifact of enrollment, i.e., Inactive students having been enrolled in fewer courses and therefore receiving fewer incompletes. The Continuing students support the pattern, averaging 4.22 incompletes each. Perhaps it should be concluded that incompletes are important, even necessary, for success in X-CED.

Rates of completion can also be compared among student groups and across semesters. Completion is defined as successful removal of an incomplete "with a passing grade." Grades of "F," whether the result of instructor action or the 12-month limit, are not counted among completions. This is done to more accurately reflect the "use" of incompletes by X-CED students and faculty.

When we examine completions, the pattern is significantly different and more what would be expected. Here Graduates lead the way, successfully completing an average of 94% of all incompletes earned. There is a large drop, to 64%, for the Continuing students, followed closely by the Inactive group at 61%. Successful students are successful at removing incompletes. The Continuing student rate may reflect a mix of those students who will go on to graduate within a larger proportion of students that will eventually leave the program. Completions do seem to be positively related to eventual success.

As a percentage of incompletes received for each group, generally, the rate of completions is higher for fall

TABLE 1

Incompletes and Completions by Student Category and Semester, Spring 1981 - Fall 1983

		Semester					
		Spring		Fall		Total	
Graduates:	Incompletes	88	(56%)	69	(44%)	157	
($n=24$)	Completions	80	(91%)	67	(97%)	147	(94%)
	Months	4.15		2.48		3.40	
Continuing:	Incompletes	147	(61%)	94	(39%)	241	
($n=57$)	Completions	93	(62%)	62	(65%)	155	(65%)
	Months	6.01		2.70		4.60	
Inactive:	Incompletes	151	(56%)	118	(44%)	269	
($n=76$)	Completions	100	(66%)	63	(53%)	163	(61%)
	Months	4.42		2.85		3.90	
Total:	Incompletes	386	(58%)	281	(42%)	667	
	Completions	273	(71%)	192	(68%)	465	(70%)
	Months	4.88		2.67		3.95	

semesters. The exception is for the Inactive student group where there is a 13% advantage for spring over fall. For all students taken together, the rate of completions is slightly better in the spring semester (71% to 68%). The fall semester may be inordinately rigorous, especially for beginning students now counted among the "Inactive."

Graduates not only have higher rates of completion, but they also average less time to remove incompletes. For all incompletes, taking into account spring and fall semester comparisons, Graduates required fewer months to achieve completions. However, it is not a consistent linear pattern. Looking at the "Total" column, Inactive students were only slightly behind Graduates with Continuing students averaging about one month longer than the other two groups. But when the semester is considered, this pattern remains only for the spring semesters. While incompletes earned in the spring generally take longer to remove than those received in the fall, it is only in the spring that Continuing students lag far behind. They may be "continuing" by virtue of having the extra summer month to complete their work.

Incompletes received in the fall semester are consistently removed in less time than those occurring in the spring. In fact, the data show that for all incompletes taken together, spring completions take nearly twice (1.8 times) as long as those occurring in the fall semester. This pattern is generally consistent for all student groups. Once again, however, the Graduate and Inactive groups are more nearly similar (1.7 and 1.6, respectively) while Continuing students show a larger variation between semesters (2.2).

It is clear that the most successful students, the Graduates, have a high rate of success in their coursework, leaving few courses not completed. Among Continuing students, about two-thirds of the incompletes received are successfully removed. Even for students who become Inactive, the majority of incompletes are replaced with a passing grade. Altogether, about 70% of all incompletes become successful course completions.

Further, additional analysis shows that most incompletes are removed within a relatively short period of time. Typically, three out of four incompletes received in the fall semester are successfully removed within 60 days after the end of that semester. Two out of three spring semester incompletes are removed prior to the beginning of the fall semester, a period of approximately four months. Only 7% (34) of all incompletes were removed in the twelfth month, immediately prior to the administrative deadline.

Combining these findings with the average 40% completion rate (passing grades only) at semester's end, some alternative performance figures can be calculated. A final completion rate of 73% for all courses between spring semester 1981, and fall semester 1983 can be estimated [(47% Incompletes × 70% Completions) + 40% Completed = 73%]. If the total for all grades of "F" are added in as well (14%), the total completions rate is approximately 87%. While a number of important issues remain, this performance picture, without a doubt, comes much closer to what might be considered "normal" from a campus viewpoint.

DISCUSSION

When we begin to reconstruct an appraisal of the X-CED program based on these findings, a number of important issues arise. Chief among these is a consideration of the finding that Graduates, those for whom (presumably) the program worked best, had an average of more than one incomplete per semester during the time frame of this study.

If we suspend the administrative assumptions of the campus, then we have a picture wherein Graduates of the program can be seen to be an extremely successful group of students. Furthermore, the program overall makes a

strong showing with 73% of the courses completed with typically a grade of "B" or better. Given the difficulties and limitations of field-based education, this view could support an entirely different appraisal of the performance of the X-CED program. Whether or not this final assessment is justifiable, it is clear that this assessment becomes possible only in the absence of the conventional university view. Unfortunately, we must constantly be reminded that we are more likely to see what we expect to see, rather than to achieve a vision grounded in the situation itself. Such shortsightedness, more often than not, arises out of the structure and practices of institutional conventions rather than from an active bias on the part of those who act for the university.

We are left with the question of what it might be like to operate a program like X-CED without the conventions of the campus. Taking the lead from the data above, we might envision a fall semester 4–5 months long and a spring semester lasting 6 months, or sessions that overlap, as they actually do now. If our data indicate some truly emergent properties of field-based education, then we might expect a significant reduction in incompletes.

On the other hand, if the formal length of semesters is changed with the expectation of a reduction in the number of incompletes, we may fall into the same sort of institutional trap that currently exists. Doing so may formalize some aspects of the program that are best left flexible (such as the length of time needed by individual students in very different settings to finish various courses). A better plan may be to leave the evolved practices in place and to encourage a more flexible interpretation of the assessment data the university collects.

Meyer and Rowan [1] suggest that the inclusion of new programs into institutionalized settings causes two things to occur. The new program tends to conform with the institutionalizing "myths" of the setting in which it seeks membership. This is done to increase the perception of validity of the new program and to provide it with the stability it needs to survive. At the same time, the institution often adapts, at least to some degree, to the new procedures and practices of the new program. Meyer and Rowan argue that this is how institutions incorporate new procedures and practices without greatly upsetting the existing "myths." A search for common ground would seem indicated.

Such dynamic interaction is what confronts the X-CED program at UAF now. It has been slowly adopting the various institutional practices of the university in order to maintain its stability and to assure its survival. The question of how far it can continue to move toward conformity to these practices without damaging its viability as an innovative and effective program in rural Alaska remains. At what point should the university adapt to the practices of X-CED? For example, should UAF provide the flexibility for X-CED to vary the length of the semester to more accurately reflect practices in the field?

These changes would obviously require a revision in a number of standard practices related to reporting of grades, validation of financial aid, and several other aspects of "normal" university functioning. On the one hand, the assessment of efficiency based on course completions could remain intact. However, if the chosen direction of resolution is to maintain current semester length and grade reporting practices, then the university must accept change in the way its course completion criteria of success are calculated. A third choice, of course, is to continue to require that X-CED conform to current practices and to apply the same course completion criteria. This choice, very likely, would lead to the end of X-CED as an innovative program. This third alternative also has some troubling implications for the university if it chooses to be unresponsive and inflexible to students' needs.

While it is not always possible to predict where conflict will develop when an innovative program or practice emerges in an institutionalized setting, it may be important for the success of any new program to assure that the particular myths of that institution are taken into account. It may also be important to assess the extent to which the instituition is ready to adapt to new practices and procedures. Without consideration of both of these conditions, the likelihood that an innovative program or practice will survive, as intended, may be minimal. Either it will be forced to accommodate the institution, in the process losing those elements that best suit it to its intended purposes, or it will be undermined by the routine evaluative practices of the institution and, as a result, be discontinued. In both cases the result is the same: innovation loses.

We are not suggesting that the X-CED program at UAF is a victim of institutional harassment or that it is, based on this evidence alone, a completely effective program. The issue raised is whether the program is being assessed by criteria that do not appropriately measure the true performance of the program. The findings of this study indicate that this may be the case. Whether these routine practices accurately assess the effectiveness of an innovative program or rather, in some unintended ways, inhibit the ability of the program to function, must be called into question. The effect of "business-as-usual" on innovative programs must be taken into account.

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