

Working More Effectively by Building Organizational Capacity



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A NACUBO research project helps institutional leaders think holistically about campus challenges and shape creative solutions.

By James E. Morley Jr.

From planning through implementation, higher education leaders must think strategically about the many high-value initiatives taking place on campus at any given time. These include everything from institutional reorganization, ERP systems installation, and curriculum change to university endowment management, fundraising, and enrollment management. As internal and external environments have become increasingly complex and as the tolerance for failure has waned, these initiatives demand more time and sharper organizational skills from senior leaders.

With financial assistance from the TIAA-CREF Institute, NACUBO convened a daylong conference in May 2003 to gain deeper insight into the leadership challenges of colleges and universities. The conversations confirmed what we know all too well: Our nation's colleges and universities face unprecedented challenges on competitive, economic, political, and technological fronts.

During the conference, we asked presidents, academics, and business officers to consider their leadership responses within the context of a preliminary conceptual framework. The framework was designed to provide principles that leaders can apply to shape effective, creative solutions in response to campus challenges. These discussions led to considering the underlying elements of institutional dynamics that a senior leader of a college or university must be mindful of and master. This is the primary focus of the Building Organizational Capacity (BOC) project, a major research and development effort of NACUBO for the past three years (see figure). A grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) provided additional financial resources. This support helped us further explore development of a conceptual framework that represents how campus leaders can most effectively achieve consistent, high-quality results with all initiatives.

A New Twist

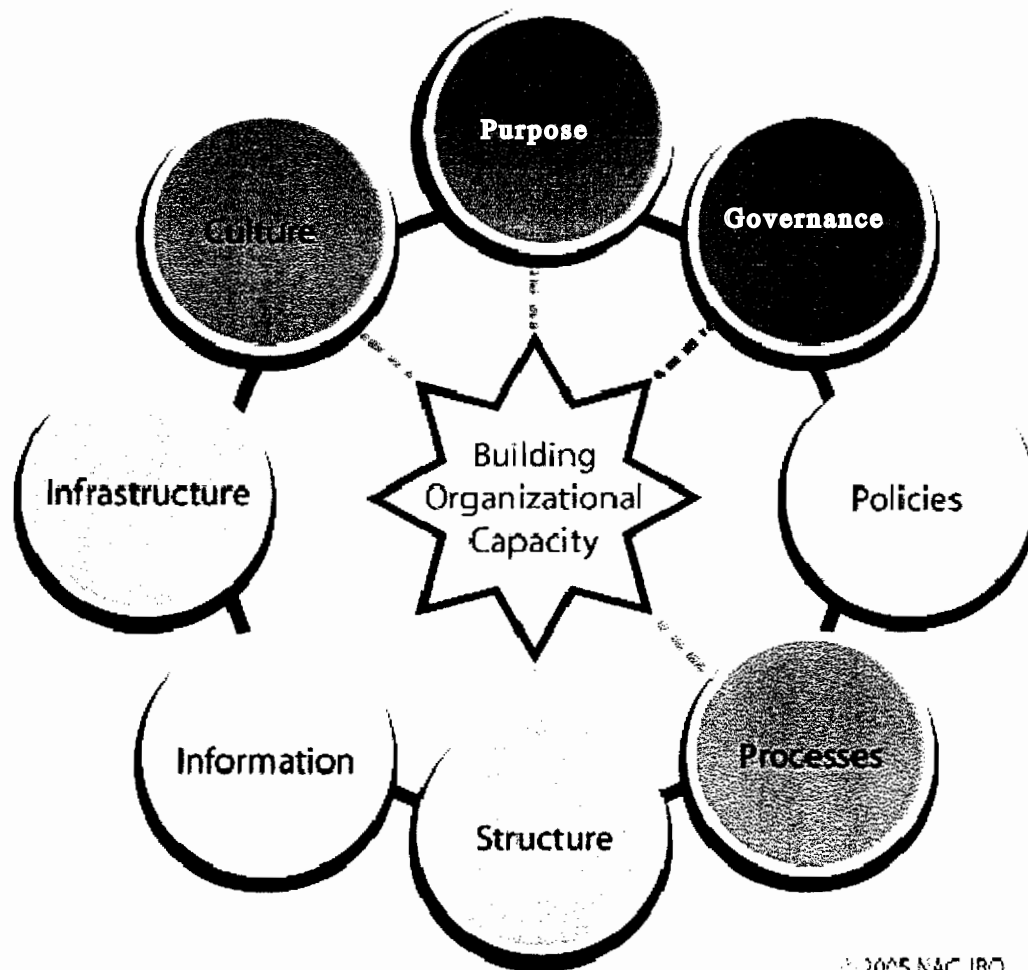
While NACUBO provides programs and publications offering skill development and specific topical suggestions for improving campus operations across departments and through institutional collaboration, the BOC project offers a different and more comprehensive twist on tackling the many and varied challenges confronting campus leaders. BOC provides higher education leaders at the CEO and cabinet-level positions with conceptual and practical tools to foster more holistic and systematic thought about improving performance and initiating major change. Furthermore, it is intended as a conceptual framework for senior leaders of academic as well as administrative support functions to more quickly achieve success with large, complex initiatives and critical processes.

The BOC framework encourages leaders to view an organization and its many parts as a complex social system with many subsystems, such as administrative and academic departments. Systems are characterized by flows of information and actions. Numerous feedback loops continually affect the flows and actions within the system. We know this intuitively from

observing campuses but, until now, we have not had a structure that captures all the critical components.

As a conceptual tool, BOC consists of a framework of eight elements, each of which can be summarized by a single word representing knowledge and understanding that general experience and casework show to be components that leaders consider and apply. Those elements are *purpose, governance, policies, processes, structure, information, infrastructure, and culture*.

One of the many practical tools offered by the BOC project is a checklist that senior leaders of colleges and universities can use to encourage systematic thinking. This checklist breaks down the eight elements into key questions that must be addressed in the planning stages of a new initiative (see sidebar, "Elemental Questions"). Leaders can then apply strategies and thinking related to each of the elements on a continuous basis during implementation and later during process refinement. In this way, leaders can better understand the dynamics and needs of various activities by realizing how the eight elements frame the system for each initiative.



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Case Study: Virginia Tech's Math Emporium

Conducting case studies has been a process of testing the validity of the eight BOC elements as tenets of effective thinking and skills applied by senior leadership at selected campuses. In other words, we started with the eight-element framework and sought to determine if, in the process of achieving project success, the engaged leadership considered all elements.

To understand how senior campus leaders can apply the BOC framework, one can look to the experience of Virginia Polytechnic Institute's Math Emporium, a large-scale initiative to provide computer-based learning for introductory courses for large numbers of undergraduates. (Details about the emporium have been well documented at www.emporium.vt.edu/emporium/newVisitor/index.html.)

Elemental Questions

Central to the NACUBO Building Organizational Capacity project is a set of eight elements critical to the planning and execution of any new initiative. When leaders of institutions or units consider these elements and how they interrelate, strategies and decision-making tactics can be fully aligned, thereby increasing the likelihood that a given initiative will be effective and lasting.

Purpose: The fundamental mission, goals, and objectives of the institution or activity.

- Are the mission, goals, and objectives clearly stated and communicated? Are there multiple goals implied that need further identification?
- Are executives accountable for achieving the purpose?

Governance: The exercise of authority, responsibility, and control over goals, activities, and results.

- Are all existing governance bodies known and properly charged and are their roles understood?
- Are policies clearly defined for all governance activities and decision making?

Policies: The core principles and practices guiding all aspects of the realization of the mission and purpose of an activity.

- Are accountable individuals empowered to make appropriate decisions?
- Are policies clearly established for all

A closer look at how Virginia Tech's Math Emporium tracks with the eight elements of the BOC framework reveals the significant organizational capacity of this initiative. For instance, clarity of **purpose** (i.e., goals) is central to success and fundamental to understanding and applying the BOC framework. In the case of the Math Emporium, the idea began with the math faculty and was continually shaped and refined during the course of several years. Important to ultimate success was alignment of departmental goals with institutional objectives to apply technology to learning and to accommodate more students with fewer faculty following severe institutional budget cuts in the early 1990s. Although opinions differed as to the many sub-goals of the initiative, the big picture was clear and guided institutionwide thinking in connection with the other seven elements.

As applied within the BOC framework, **governance** is used broadly to define the engagement and accountability of many groups that play a role either as decision makers or representatives of engaged contributing parties. For the Math Emporium, committed and qualified faculty and staff came together at appropriate times to plan the academic and administrative work required for this complex effort, which included determining systems software, purchasing equipment, leasing and outfitting a building, and so forth.

Likewise, **policies** and formal understandings were in place to guide and facilitate decisions and actions at each important juncture. The role of the faculty and departments were well understood throughout. In keeping with Virginia Tech's long tradition of decentralized decision making, the chief business officer and his staff entered the project at the appropriate time to guide long-term funding, lease a facility, and construct the Math Emporium space.

For this initiative to flourish, a multitude of **processes** came into play—from new curriculum approval and budget approval to coordination with the registrar's office for student registration and grade recording for a completely new classroom environment. Within the BOC framework, processes offer good insight into the connectivity with the other seven elements. For instance, ideally each established policy has a clear purpose. Most

goals are realized.

- Are all essential processes that are required for success identified and documented?
- Are processes supported by appropriate calibration with the other elements, namely: information, infrastructure, governance, structure, and policies?

Structure: The organization of people and activities identified and aligned to accomplish mission, goals, and core processes.

- Are all aspects of the organization arranged in a manner that allows the other elements to support the purpose?
- Are staff and related leadership reporting responsibilities aligned so that executives who are accountable can carry out policies and processes?

Information: The supporting information and data that promote effective communication, management, and oversight.

- Have the information requirements for goal attainment as they relate to the other elements been identified and documented?

Infrastructure: The human, physical, and financial support assets as well as the related information systems used to create and sustain the entire effort as defined by the purpose.

- Are there sufficient assets and resources planned for or provided to ensure success of the purpose, as assessed from the perspective of each of the other elements?

Culture: The overall character, values, and beliefs of the organization—its essential personality.

- Does the purpose create conflict with existing cultures? Is success impaired as a result?
- Are all levels (e.g., university, college, departmental) of culture taken into consideration as they might affect the purpose and the other elements?

policies at colleges and universities go through a governance step for development and finalization. And, policies stand behind every process.

Structure also plays a key role in the development and communication of processes, as detailed processes are aggregated in step fashion into increasingly larger areas such as project design and approval. Structure is an organizing attribute for many aspects of the Math Emporium project and operations, including structure imposed on the curriculum and related IT systems and incorporated within the various study and implementation groups that worked together for several years.

Information served a vital role throughout the planning, implementation, and operations of the Math Emporium. At every stage, key parties were kept informed of all aspects of the project. There were extensive information flows and requirements to faculty, offices such as the registrar, students, and the several administrative offices that had critical roles to play at various stages.

In very real terms, the Math Emporium would not exist without the appropriate **infrastructure**. The current facility is 60,000 square feet and has more than 500 IT learning stations. Within the BOC framework, infrastructure is broadly defined to include equipment, people, facilities, and even financial support. While the most obvious infrastructure associated with the Math Emporium is its physical facility and equipment, other significant infrastructure assets include staff, faculty, and software and training.

Last but not least in consideration is **culture**, which on its own can influence major aspects of any initiative. In the case of Virginia Tech and in the context of its entrepreneurial environment, academic and administrative departments have a high degree of freedom to explore new ideas and to develop and implement them. A culture of central administration oversight enters the picture when resource requirements reach certain levels. These and other institutional cultural norms allow a variety of activities to be in constant motion and development without undue interference until the point when resource needs or clear program policies provide other guidance.

The Future of BOC

Among the key objectives of the BOC project has been to help establish a vocabulary for higher education leaders to enhance communication about initiative planning and implementation. To date, BOC concepts and related case studies have been presented at several national and regional meetings of campus leaders throughout the United States. The project has also been endorsed by several of the major higher education professional and presidential associations. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems has provided ongoing evaluation of BOC since its inception.

Learn More

Jay Morley, author of this article, is currently working on a book to capture the lessons of the Building Organizational Capacity project and to suggest how the concept and related tools can be used by campus leaders. Key BOC literature, including case studies and presentations, can be found on the Building Organizational Capacity Knowledge Network, a NACUBO interactive technology platform that was developed with

While the BOC project has formally come to a close with the completion of the FIPSE grant, the enduring impact of the project is evident. During the project, nine faculty members from higher education administration graduate programs across the nation participated in BOC

case study development. This faculty team worked to introduce BOC concepts into the research literature on higher education and integrate the concepts into teaching within graduate programs. Some team members have begun to frame their own teaching and research using BOC concepts and case studies. In doing so, they continue to test and extend the framework while introducing it to students in classes and to other scholars through conference presentations and journal articles. In this way, the BOC project has the potential to add further depth to graduate education, deepening and broadening the discussion of management and systems thinking in administration programs.

support from SunGard SCT. NACUBO members can learn more about BOC by logging onto www.nacubo.org/knowledgenetworks and becoming a member of the BOC Knowledge Network.

The longer-term vision is for the BOC conceptual framework to become internalized among campus leaders. For those in senior leadership positions at colleges and universities and across the broad higher education community, the ability to clearly identify and describe the elements of complex campus initiatives is vital for avoiding confusion among stakeholders and waste of precious institutional resources. BOC can be another important leadership tool for American higher education. Campuses can effectively use the concept to meet the increasing number of challenges facing higher education within the economic, political, and technological realms and to broaden the capacity to shape creative, meaningful solutions to those challenges.

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