

A Vision for Leadership: The Fully Functioning Postgraduate School or Office

By E. Alana James, EdD

Abstract

This article presents a thought experiment focussed on the pragmatic leadership issues of the modern postgraduate school (PGS). Drawing upon the ideal of the fully functioning university presented in earlier issues of this journal, this new chapter first identifies the problems facing PGS Deans, then discusses how the various stakeholders might work together to enhance the tripartite mission of the university. Theoretically considering what kind of leadership would be needed in the pursuit of the fully functioning ideal, the article ends with the discussion of its practical efficacy.

Keywords: higher education leadership, tripartite mission, fully functioning, postgraduate education, postgraduate leadership, graduate education, Masters and Doctoral education,

Introduction

Three previous articles in this journal introduced and explored the concept of the fully functioning university (Bourner, 2008; Bourner, et al, 2013, 2016). Known as the tripartite mission, universities strive for advancement of: knowledge, student skill development and achievement, and societal improvement. Research on this topic often centres on new programs which have effect on all three (Chan, 1998; Horowitz, 2007; Marston, 2002). Less frequently writers use these three missions as a stepping off place to discuss the chaos and organizational dilemmas facing the modern campus or a discussion of the challenges in community and industrial relationships (Parker & Jary, 1995; Tasker, & Packham, 1993; and Hague, reissued 2013). The first article in Higher Education Review (2008) concluded that three missions should be addressed separately but simultaneously because when one becomes dominant it is to the detriment of them all. Hence a fully functioning university is one equitably adheres to the tripartite mission.

The second article (2013) began to address how this might be done. The authors identified three forms (or foci) corresponding to each of the originally identified functions, domains of activity are: subject-centred, student-centred and society-centred work. Taking this a step forward, the most recent article, (2016) explored the implications of the second article by focusing on the first mission/function. This time the authors asked how subject, student, and society centredness apply to the advancement of knowledge? It concluded with suggestions that research can contribute to all three forms across all three functions, especially as new knowledge may frequently lead to the greater well-being of humanity. Figure 1 is a quick chart of how functions and domains of activity sort out using the Bourne *et al* (2013) model.

Mission / Goals Activities	Advancement of Knowledge	Advancement of Student	Advancement of Society/the world
Subject-centred	Advancement of Knowledge through Subjects	Advancement of Student through Subjects-	Advancement of Society/the world/ through Subjects
Student-centred	Advancement of Knowledge through student centred activities	Advancement of Student through student centred activities	Advancement of Society/the world through student centred activities
Society-Centred	Advancement of Knowledge through society centred activities	Advancement of Student through society centred activities	Advancement of Society/the world through society centred activities

Figure 1: Table illustrating the ideas of Bourne et al 2013

While these ideas are provocative, they lead a person to ask whether and to what extent they are also pragmatic? When we ask, “Can they easily be implemented to create sustainable programmatic differences?” and then simultaneously look at the current work environment of the modern university the task of moving towards fully functioning seems to have insurmountable issues. The 2013 article admonishes the reader that, “when considering an activity, a fully functioning university should ask, ‘what will be the impact of this activity on the three goals?’ (pg. 8).” Yet, we know that the people who work in universities have full jobs, and are often planning actions in an environment where everything is on a deadline. In this environment, there is not much likelihood every consequence to the tripartite mission is considered with each action.

Written perhaps before the full impact of technology was understood, the authors (2016) also forgot to ask, “Who will see that new initiatives integrate with each other?” “What data will be used to keep these ideas fresh?” “Who will track their success and adoption over time to prove the efficacy of these claims?” The only new strategic developments in higher education that are likely to be sustained are those that reduce work load as they improve education and in today’s world, each needs to be supported with technology to survive. Does this mean we dump the fully functioning ideal or can we, perhaps, divide the task orientation of the tripartite mission through a strategic use of collaboration, merging efforts with data collection, and analysis?

This article proposes a thought experiment and uses the Postgraduate School (PGS, also known in the US as Graduate school) as the test environment. Why limit the scope of this article to a typical, decentralized PGS? Because it is an efficient illustration as to how leaders can get past challenges would otherwise stall the fully functioning ideal. Decentralisation, managing change during ongoing work, and ensuring data is captured in appropriate technology affect much of the university structure.

The PGS as thought experiment may seem less daunting than imagining a complete reorganization across an entire university to support equalization of the tripartite mission. At the same time, PGS is an apt location for this discussion because it embodies the heart of the advancement of knowledge, student growth and society. PGS is a relatively small department, yet it has a disproportionately large degree of interactions across the programs and colleges as it supports not only postgraduate students, and faculty, but also the vision and mission of the university through final publications, attendance at conferences etc.

To bring an organizational development and leadership lens to the concept of fully functioning, this article asks:

1. How would a postgraduate leader go about organizing their work with others to advance the fully functioning ideal?
2. What theory of leadership would prove useful?
3. Is it worth the effort?

On first glance, the answers seem to suggest positive outcomes. Certain natural divisions of labour across the tripartite mission already exist, and, therefore, may only require a small amount of reshaping to equalize their effects. In brief, the central component of the subject-centred drive is squarely seen already to be the purview of each program or college. Student-centred activities such as professional development, reside and should continue to be the responsibility of the postgraduate office. Society-centred ideology, is naturally considered to be part of the mission of the university. It seems a logical extension therefore, that with proper collaboration on data collection and analysis, feedback loops can easily be established that will benefit the university by establishing and maintaining all three endeavours. The Bourne, et al (2013) article makes a case that this will result in higher rankings, at least with Time Higher Education (Baty, 2017), but on a more immediate and practical level it should also continue to ferment the types of stories that make recruiting and enrolling new students easier (James, 2017, James & Leasure, 2017).

To test what leadership would be required, this article first formulates the issues and problems most common in the decentralized PGS. Employing a pragmatic conceptual model to consider who does what, to develop and sustain new activities adapting the principles of agile development is proposed (Reis & Summers, 2016). The “four-frame” theoretical model of leadership leads the reader into the discussion of what would be needed, and the article ends with a discussion of whether and why the goal of the fully functioning or tripartite mission makes sense in a modern PGS context.

Background

Three assumptions underlie these ideas: 1) postgraduate education has now become a hallmark for a growing wave of a new level of democratization globally and therefore fully functioning as defined by Bourne, *et al*, seems fitting. 2) the PGS has lost its elitist point of view and while it behoves educators to work to teach everyone at every level of previous skill development to achieve postgraduate status, this adds an additional burden of work 3) that a basic mission of PGS has evolved to create leadership with the capacities needed for research and innovation in all fields, not just the requirements of academia. This last being a goal still largely in development.

This is not to say that even when considering just the relatively small populations of Masters and Doctoral students, designing and implementing the work across fully functioning lines is not daunting. Three major challenges present themselves whenever a PGS considers taking on a new strategic position. While it is inspiring to consider the fully functioning tripartite, pragmatically it is difficult to lead change in a decentralized environment, with an already full workload, while considering the challenges and opportunities of technology to coordinate and track these efforts. Each of these warrants discussion in more detail.

Challenges in leading change in a decentralized environment

PGS offices are most usually decentralised, following one of a variety of models as to where students apply and pay their tuition and then how the offices are financed, either directly through the provost or indirectly through the colleges and programs they support. In one common example, the PGS is the hub of a wheel, supporting multiple programs across a group of colleges or institutes. Each program frequently has differentiated requirements for admissions, credits required, and graduation requirements. It is likely the PGS that deals with the disenfranchised student, signs off on special supports, tracks advancement and issues graduation diplomas.

Structurally PGS offices have little if any authority to change how the work in the colleges mature, even though they regularly deal with the breakdown situations with students when things go wrong. Deans sit on committees and work with others to make decisions which, as one educator recently reminded this author, “has both its good points and its bad points” (James, 2017). Leadership that brings about positive change in a decentralized environment has a greater likelihood of long-term sustainability. Yet, decentralised change demands consistent leadership strong in both vision and human resources expertise. Not every PGS is lucky enough to attract such a leader or to have them stay long enough to make a difference.

Challenges of leading change while “getting the current work done.”

The mundane, human characteristics commonly seen in the work-a-day world of the PGS include: responsibility for data and professional development delivery across many decentralized programs. In addition, staff act as the middle ground for potentially competing structures, ideals, types of outcomes, levels of funding for students, etc. Some might say that the PGS Dean’s primary focus is managing chaos. It is no wonder then that most Deans would balk at being responsible for leading the perceived changes required to move the entire tripartite ideal forward. Clearly, what would be needed would need to layer easily over their current work without causing new stress or taking the focus away from their current student-centred activities.

The challenges to leadership presented by technology...

Why is technology an important consideration, especially now? There are at least three reasons:

- 1) Technology is at the forefront of any decision regarding change because outcomes across diverse stakeholders and activities can only be accurately measured with the proper databases pre-designed to capture the results. It is much easier to design measurement systems as technology is introduced rather than to retro-fit it to purpose later. Therefore, questions regarding measurement and data collection need to be addressed across the three goals and domains of activity as a university moves toward fully functioning (James & Leasure, 2017).
- 2) Universities, pushed as they are by governing bodies to do more with less, are beginning the transition to the agile development practises standard in industries which have matured to employ technology throughout their work (James & Leasure, 2017; Murray, 2008; Ries & Summers, 2016)). Agility requires diverse teams separating tasks, working towards results, testing them with broad technological applications as they develop. Ideas mature as everyone works separately yet congruently with other teams on similar or at least co-joined missions. In a manner similar to formative evaluation, new procedures are tested for efficacy as they develop and adjustments are made as these data are analysed.

- 3) The financial constraints of bringing on new technology only become more onerous with time. Therefore, the university leadership is considering what makes for the best possible outcomes. These include inter-operability of systems and data across the entire student (in this case postgraduate student) lifecycle (James & Leasure, 2017).

Developing a pragmatic conceptual model for postgraduate fully functioning efforts

The goal of leadership is to develop a way to proceed in an appreciative manner; in this case, one that builds a better environment for all who work, teach or attend the graduate school. Basic organizational development theory would have leaders work to ensure not only that the fully functioning ideals gain traction, but that consideration be given as to how they would do so structurally, across human resources, politically and symbolically as well (Bolman & Deal, 2017). For that reason, these frames for leadership need to also be considered.

No single portion of a university would have the capacity to address the fully functioning gamut of tasks. Yet, the division of labour needs to be set up to ensure activities and outcomes are planned, tracked, and reconsidered at regular intervals to safeguard steady progress toward the goals. How, then, to best separate the ownership of each section of the tripartite mission?

At least in the sphere of the PGS an easy separation of responsibility already exists. Programmes and colleges are naturally responsible for subject centred goals, taking it on themselves to track research outcomes, patents, and innovations in relationship with industry. The PGS itself, largely because it is decentralized, is in the best position to take up the mantle of student centred, training mentorship, developing writing and professional development opportunities across the fields. The university administration and board of directors are naturally where society centred policies develop. They have access to longitudinal data on alumni advancement as well as all the publications and awards earned by students and faculty that fuel those stories.

Just as with formative evaluation, a first step is to collaboratively build a data collection and analysis plan. Coordination and measurement across the three would be needed to ensure consistent improvement. Building on data already available, with small expansion these efforts could capture qualitative as well as quantitative data, giving their collaborative efforts the punch they need to succeed.

Bolman and Deal (2017) call this structure an “all-channel network” characterized in a drawing by a point for each player working in support of one of the tripartite goals. Each point can be seen on the edge of a circle with lines of communication that run around the edge and across its diameter connecting each box directly to every other box. As these authors point out, team sports provide a useful analogy to this type of network, with many players, some stars and some subordinate, all taking their part in running the ball to the goal line. Agile development is perfectly suited to foster new activities so that each of the nine boxes in fully functioning model suggested by Bourne et al (2013) and illustrated previously in Figure 1 would be given equal attention.

If coordination between the programmes, the PGS and the university liaisons are consistent, and if their work feeds into a planned data extraction system, then shortly (within the first year) that system should be catching gems of information that could be used in marketing and recruitment campaigns. Used across a variety of yearly publications, going out to all stakeholders and alumni, reporting on the progress towards ongoing development and innovation on all three goals, these data will prove a rich and positive source for positive communication back to all stakeholders (James & Leasure, 2017).

Rethinking fully functioning against four theoretical frames for leadership

Organizational change becomes sustainable when leaders consider four frames of reference: its impact structurally, on the people involved, across internal and external politics, and finally through the symbolic vision of what is trying to be created (Bolman & Deal, 2008). This thought experiment starts with the symbolic vision – to create a fully functioning PGS collaboration to advance knowledge, students and society in equal measure throughout Masters and Doctoral programmes. What will be the effects of imposing this symbolic structure on the other three frames?

The strongest, most sustainable changes are those that uplift the human experience as they make a positive improvement in the professional experience and outputs. In the too busy world of most PGS, positive impact on human resource requires a lot of outcome for very little if any increase in effort. Fortunately, if adopted in the manner above, with each mission being “owned” by a different portion of the administration, yet merged through data, this seems possible.

As has been demonstrated throughout the history of appreciative inquiry, groups focussing on the positive find meetings inspirational. The collaborative effort brings Colleges together demonstrating their effectiveness, as University Admin focus on their benefits to society and PGS staff bring stories of

student success. These are not merely appreciative stories for outsiders, they lift the hearts and morale of those working on the team and their colleagues as well.

While people in higher education are stressed, so are the structures or systems within the university. Structurally, the fully functioning ideal drives collaborative outcomes that improve success of the whole. Postgraduate deans create a comprehensive tool to improve learning, progression, cost reduction, and innovation. By having data integrated from all systems as well as behavioural, social, affective, and cognitive information on each student, both personalized support and analytics for overall improvement are possible. But these data also capture the stories of success that prove the universities' mission in advancement of knowledge and improvement of society through student outcomes.

What structural stresses will be added? Of course change includes new stress, in this case internal cross-college or administration network capacity will have added pressure and a relatively small amount of integration across data systems will need to be scheduled. If managed through asynchronous communication with each group agilely working on improving their outputs, minimal extra stress is predicted at the personnel level.

Success is good politically and collaborative efforts ease internal and external political tensions. Mapping success across these domains of activity, the groups responsible can participate in using these outcomes to promote the whole. This should enliven both the political environment on campus and give fodder for positive communication with government and industry partners.

Finally, readdressing the symbolic frame, the fully functioning ideal embodies the best of what it means to be a university. That is the essence of its appeal and it speaks at a visceral level to the hearts and minds of people – transforming the symbolic vision that clues together with the activities of everyone involved. The power of the symbolic frame is that when it is firmly in place it uplifts the efforts of those in marketing, recruiting, enrolling, hiring, etc.

Will it Work?

Bolman and Deal present several determinants of successful teamwork that may prove useful in helping to determine if the fully functioning ideal may work, or not, at any given institution. The answer is dependent on the local constraints of the following: the way individuals in this group relate to each other in other contexts, the nature of the leadership on campus and the power structure between players, the extent to which technology integrates the outcomes, how those outcomes are used, etc. As leadership changes, the rules of the game need to change as well (2017).

To implement this vision, the PGS leader first would need to consider whether and to what extent they believe in the tripartite ideal enough to carve out the time to address it with their colleagues. Then if consensus allows the process and the particulars to move forward, IT considerations need to be addressed. Most likely, background data from each administrative unit already exists and the people with that knowledge can repurpose it through either a database or spreadsheet. Finally, all the collaborative stakeholders need to commit to capturing their current school successes in such way as to have them highlight these successes.

Two questions remain: Is it worth it to the PGS to take this on as a trial case? Are there examples of work in progress from which we can learn?

The postgraduate environment as a testing ground for fully functioning concept

The three challenges faced by every PGS, discussed at the beginning of this article, are not unique within a university, but they do create a robust environment upon which to consider whether and to what extent fully functioning as outlined by Bourne et al (2013, 2016) may be workable.

Perhaps those same challenges become positives when looked at through the symbolic lens of moving towards fully functioning. For instance, the challenge of leading in a decentralized environment (no concrete structure to stand on) becomes a plus for PGS leaders who are skilled at teambuilding as they can use the meetings required to merge stories and outcome data to further the relationships they need to advance PGS goals at another time. This would call the human resource and political frame into play (Bolman & Deal, 2017) as the team built on appreciative successes. Multiple heads of schools and programs all meeting occasionally to share stories of their own programs will naturally ferment new ideas and innovative solutions. Likewise, this symbolic frame helps outsiders (potential students, their parents, or industry partners) view the university in the best possible light

The challenge of change while completing the myriad tasks already required can be used to tighten the team effort within the PGS department. This is especially true when their primary focus becomes student centredness and the collection and analysis of those data. Data analysis is never single

focused as it always brings up new understanding which can populate many aspects of the work we do, in the case of student-centred data this equates to a wider positive postgraduate student experience.

The challenge of bringing on board adequate data comparison points or the ability to warehouse data across the tripartite mission effectively is easily studied and upgraded in the relatively small environment of the PGS (James, & Leasure, 2017) where later it can expand out across the entire university. To that end, an appreciative approach works for the university as well as from the faculty and student perspectives. These data quickly transform into marketable stories. In fact a fully functioning approach may have the biggest measurable outcome at that level in marketing and publicity.

Examples of work in progress

Most professionals in higher education can point to multiple ways in which their universities are already focused to some degree on one or more aspects of the tripartite mission, making these ideas more an exercise in collecting them than anything else. As the original authors pointed out, many examples of each abound. For instance:

- Programs within most universities around the world collect and use examples of advancement of knowledge through subjects. This can be seen on every university website broadcasting success areas for both students and professors.
- Likewise, websites proclaim the personal advancement of their students, including areas of health and well-being as well as career outcomes for their alumni. Frequently the marketing message is to use education to not only advance a career but also as a stepping stone for personal growth.
- Society oriented outcomes are frequent in the STEM colleges as their innovation and research programs are easy to frame in that context. However, it is perhaps in the non-profit or religious universities that a true mission of improving society is strongest. Jesuit universities state this mission from the first engagement.

Conclusion: a question of leadership

Given these examples, is fully functioning anything new? Likely not, as new as it may have originally seemed. What then is the real story? Perhaps it is one of the importance for humans of reaching for bigger goals and visions and the importance of the right kind of leadership to instil a vision and consistent set of practices towards those goals. In a time where the news consistently focuses on university closures, issues of finance, student safety on campus, plagiarism, etc. it should be an advantage to leadership to propose and maintain the fully functioning banner of activity.

Will a fully functioning ideal benefit the university and its financial bottom line? Yes, this author concludes it very well might. Postgraduates attend universities to follow their own personal higher vision. Since that is the case, it is easy to imagine that a university where the PGS took on the mantra of “building knowledge, building student skills and success at the same time building a better future for society” would find an edge in recruitment. Likely data should prove this truth as soon as all the players have the data to back up their claims.

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