

**Module 4: Higher Education Institution Metaphor**

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## Higher Education Institutions are like Endangered Animals

Higher Education Institutions are like a living organism – in this case, an endangered organism needing to adapt.



Higher education institutions are like organisms capable of adapting to change and evolving over time to survive. Traditionally, institutions have had long periods to implement changes, but recently environmental factors such as student enrollment characteristics, operating costs, and need for access and equality have been changing at a faster rate than institutions can adapt. This has thrown off the equilibrium between organism and ecosystem putting the organism at risk.

### Organisms and Institutions Must Adapt to Survive

The capability to change does not necessitate change. All living things are adapted to their environment but endangered animals are adapted to an environment that is no longer a reality. One example of this is the Hawksbill turtle who is a fundamental species in maintaining a healthy coral reef ecosystem and is a protected species by multiple countries. Unfortunately, Hawksbill turtles are hunted for their highly valuable, beautiful shells and have suffered extensive habitat loss due to pollution, excessive egg collection, and other concerns (World Wildlife Fund [WWF], 2021). A first-order change is quick and relatively easy and can be observed through the expansion of the turtles' hunting areas and their increased aptitude for hiding from predators (Kezar, 2014; WWF, 2021). Unfortunately, these changes are in response to immediate dangers but are not drastic enough to ensure the survival of the species. Second-order changes require new assets and transformation and are long-term solutions to problems (Kezar, 2014). If the turtle could simply change and adapt to the changing environment by developing different

patterns on its shell, feeding on different organisms, or laying eggs in a different habitat, it would be able to survive, but of course, biological changes take time just as institutional changes take time.

Thinking of a higher education institution as a living organism that must adapt to its surroundings to survive provides a framework to understand the different pressures that promote structural inertia which make change difficult (PSU, n.d.b). Institutions are often historical establishments that have operated through defined interaction with their environment (the local community, regional institutional peers, and other internal and external constituents) over many years. They provide certain services to their environment and receive certain services in return. However, their environment is changing at a much faster rate than the institutions are changing, in turn, introducing environmental pressure. Certainly, higher education is not endangered as a whole, but its response to the increasing environmental pressures will likely be indicative of its future longevity and maintained success. Just as the turtle has expanded its hunting area and become more adept at hiding from predators, the higher education institutions of today have expanded recruitment efforts and adapted responses to external threats to their stability.

A key difference between endangered organisms and higher education institutions is that survival is not the ultimate goal of an institution. Rather, a successful institution must maintain equilibrium with its environment so that it may thrive to pursue and advance towards fulfilling its mission. It is the responsibility of higher education administrators and leaders to implement strategic changes in response to instances of organizational vulnerability, “to ensure the survival of the coalition, and this entails working to minimize the possibility of resources becoming scarce or uncertain” (PSU, n.d.b, p. 6).

All too often, institutions implement first-order changes in response to environmental pressures. Just as the hawksbill expanding their hunting area will not save them from extinction, investing resources in campus renovations so it is advanced, modern, and chic will not restore institutional financial stability. Instead, fundamental second-order changes must be made to respond to the huge environmental pressures that institutions are facing. These changes will be difficult to implement because leaders must assert forces strong enough to restore movement to problems with high structural inertia (PSU, n.d.b).

### **Adaptions to my Original Metaphor**

I have adapted my original metaphor to include the mission as the ultimate goal of a university rather than simply being content to survive. I have also made connections between the need to resist the comforts and barriers of high structural inertia so it is possible to pursue second-order changes.

Interacting with my peers revealed missed connections to theories, specifically regarding institutional competition as a barrier and specifying the key role administrators play in introducing and facilitating changes.

### **Summarize and Reflect on Constituents' Metaphors**

#### **Constituents' Metaphors**

A common theme among my peers' metaphors is that organizational change occurs to address complex problems. These problems could require first-order change which occurs quickly by slightly changing existing structures, like picking weeds in a garden (Kezar, 2014; Rae, 2021). Second-order changes, on the other hand, "require new assets and transformation" such as planting new flowers (Rae, 2021, para. 2). Multiple people, such as administrators, faculty, staff, and students must work together to assess the problem demanding change, identify the rules they must follow, and most importantly, maintain strong communication (Pavone, 2021).

The metaphors chosen by my peers were diverse and reflected their personal interests and abstract interpretations of concrete ideas. A "savvy administrator" is a leader who is characterized by fostering an environment where their employees and coworkers feel comfortable expressing their interests and proposing creative solutions. This environment must be nurtured and maintained by an administrator who listens to these proposals and implements their teams' ideas whenever possible. Higher education is rapidly changing in response to an array of pressures. If it is to survive and thrive, it must reestablish equilibrium with its ecosystem (Roten, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Administrators must employ various leadership strategies to foster a supportive working environment characterized by collaboration and communication. These two characteristics will encourage

various internal constituents to express their ideas and be willing to work towards breaking down structural inertia to pursue the illusive second-order changes that are necessary for an institution's success. This assignment has reinforced these beliefs because although each of my classmates' metaphors were extremely different, they each illustrated the same concepts surrounding the difficulty, necessity, and possibility of bringing about meaningful institutional change. It highlighted the future mosaic of differences that an administrative office will surely encompass, and it emphasized the necessity of strategic leadership to guide and unify a department to pursue the advancement of the institutional mission as a team.

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